FROM KRAKOW TO KRYPTON

JEWS AND COMIC BOOKS

With gratitude to Hashem for the gift
of our three Jewish super-heroes,
ARIELLE, ELI, AND DANIEL

Bryna Shuchat and Joshua Landes

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JEWS AND COMIC BOOKS

ARIE KAPLAN

Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother,

ADELE POMERANC,

a true hero ...
who also happened to be from Krakow.

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Foreword by Harvey Pekar   Illustrations by JT Waldman

JEWS ARE STILL QUITE ACTIVE IN THE COMIC BOOK BUSINESS,

BUT THEY DON'T DOMINATE IT LIKE THEY USED TO IN THE 1930S AND 1940S.

DURING THE DEPRESSION, THERE WAS A SIZEABLE JEWISH WORKING CLASS, MEMBERS OF WHICH HAD MORE HURDLES TO CLEAR ON THE WAY TO FAME AND FORTUNE THAN YOUNG JEWS DO TODAY.

MANY JEWS WERE DARING ENTREPRENEURS, WILLING TO CREATE A BUSINESS ON A SHOESTRING.

JEWS TRIED EVERYTHING TO MAKE A LIVING.

THERE WAS EVEN A LARGE NUMBER OF JEWISH BOXERS IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. SOME BECAME WORLD CHAMPIONS.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS WERE TERRIBLE, AND THERE WAS A LOT OF DISCRIMINATION; SOME JEWS TRIED TO LIVE BY THEIR WITS.

A NUMBER OF THEM INVESTED IN THE FILM INDUSTRY AT ITS INCEPTION AND GREW WEALTHY.

YOU WANT TO DO WHAT? IF YOU TRY TO PULL THAT OFF YOU'LL WIND UP BANKRUPT.

SO WHAT? I'LL START UP ANOTHER BUSINESS.

OY GEVALT!

THAT BENNY LEONARD! HE'S THE GREATEST LIGHTWEIGHT IN HISTORY!

NO "ARBEIT VIE A FERD LEIGT IN D'RERD" FOR ME.*

NOT "ARTFUL" ENOUGH FOR YOU? DON'T WORRY, THE PUBLIC WILL LOVE IT, SONNY BOY.

* YIDDISH FOR: "WORK LIKE A HORSE END UP IN THE GROUND."

AMONG THE EARLY JEWISH CARTOONISTS WERE SOME GREAT ONES, LIKE WILL EISNER, THE CREATOR OF THE WONDERFUL FEATURE *THE SPIRIT*, AND AN EARLY AUTHOR OF GRAPHIC NOVELS. ONE OF EISNER'S DISCIPLES WAS JULES FEIFFER. FEIFFER WORKED WITH EISNER IN THE 1940S, THEN WENT ON TO BE AN AVANT-GARDE WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR THROUGH THE '50S AND '60S.

TRUE, MANY OF THESE EARLY PUBLICATIONS WERE CLICHE RIDDEN AND POORLY DRAWN. STILL, THEY WERE A BRIGHT SPOT TO MANY SOLDIERS, SAILORS, AND SCHOOL KIDS OF THAT ERA—STRONG AND CONFIDENT, JUST LIKE WORLD WAR II AMERICANS IN GENERAL.

THINGS WERE GOING GREAT UNTIL THE PSYCHOLOGIST FREDERICK WERTHAM PUBLISHED HIS ATTACK ON COMICS, *SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT.* WERTHAM ALLEGED THAT COMICS BRED JUVENILE DELIQUENCY AND SEXUAL DEPRAVITY.

LARGELY AS A RESULT OF *SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT*, COMIC BOOK AFTER COMIC BOOK, PUBLISHER AFTER PUBLISHER, FOLDED—COMICS BEGAN TO BE CENSORED. SPECIAL BOARDS DETERMINED WHICH COMICS WERE SUITABLE FOR KIDS.

PARADOXICALLY, ONE OF THE GREATEST AND MOST INFLUENTIAL OF COMICS, *MAD*, WAS BORN AT THIS TIME. *MAD* WAS THE BRAINCHILD OF EDITOR, WRITER, AND ILLUSTRATOR HARVEY KURTZMAN. IT INTRODUCED SATIRE INTO COMICS, MOVIES, TV SHOWS, ADVERTISMENTS, AND OTHER THINGS TOO NUMEROUS TO MENTION.

WHERE'S YOUR COMICS RACK?

WE TOOK IT OUT. NO ONE WAS BUYIN' EM.

MAN, THIS STARCHIE STORY IS GREAT.

IT'S A TAKE-OFF ON ARCHIE, RIGHT?

YUP, RIGHT AGAIN.

Jews and comic books.

A curious topic. One wouldn't group the two subjects together as readily as, say, Jews and comedy or African Americans and hip-hop. But there it is. Those in the know realize that Jews almost single-handedly built the comic-book industry from the ground up. And I should know. For the past five years, I've immersed myself in this topic.

In 2002, I was approached by one of my freelance clients to write a series on Jews in comic books. I'd been writing for *MAD Magazine* for two years, and apparently I was the guy to write this series. After all, *MAD* started out in 1952 as a comic book published by EC Comics. EC was once a flourishing line of comics published by Bill Gaines, who took over from his father, Max Gaines. And Max invented the comic book. *Invented* it. So, by virtue of my being a *MAD* writer, I'm bound to this history. Makes you think.

Needless to say, I took my quest seriously. The first person I interviewed was my *MAD* colleague Al Jaffee, he of the "*MAD* Fold-In" and "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions." Turns out that not only is Al an amazing interview subject, he's also the Zelig of comics. He knows everyone! "You know who you should interview next?" he asked. "Will Eisner. Want his phone number?" I nodded dumbly, amazed that he was just *giving* me the phone number of Will Eisner, the father of the modern graphic novel. Every marquee name in comics—Stan Lee, Joe Kubert, Jerry Robinson—has some connection to Al Jaffee. His name opened up a lot of doors, and for that I'm eternally grateful. I went on to re-interview many of those same people when the time came to expand the "Jews in comics" magazine series into a book. So unless I've noted otherwise, the interviews in this manuscript were conducted by yours truly. But this book isn't merely a series of interview quotes. There's a real story here. Some of the same names—Lee, Kirby, Siegel, Shuster, Eisner, and some dude named Kurtzman— reappear throughout, giving the story its spine. Like many narratives about the Jewish people, this is the story of a tradition. A tradition that was handed down from one generation to the next. Only in this case, that tradition is comics. (As opposed to, say, textiles.)

The story of Jews' involvement in comic books is a reflection of Jews' changing status in American society. Early Jewish cartoonists, street kids with no formal artistic training, wrote and drew comic books to feed their families. It came from an instinct for survival, and this is

evident in the thousands of crude superhero yarns that were so hastily churned out during the industry's so-called Golden Age. When one thinks of a Jewish comics artist during the Golden Age, one thinks of the legendary cartoonist Jack "the King" Kirby hunched over a desk in some mythical bullpen, green cigar poking out of his mouth, wiping cigar ash off the pages as he curses to himself in a thick "Noo Yawk" accent. And even before it became okay to discuss one's ethnicity in the pages of a comic book, Jewish artists and writers like Kirby and Jerry Siegel were concealing subtle Jewish signifiers in comic-book characters such as Captain America and Superman. But more on that later.

Young Jewish comics professionals who emerged during the '60s and '70s were the first generation to have grown up on the idiom itself, and thus they had a vocabulary to work from. They were second-generation comic nuts, and like their Baby Boomer brethren in the film and TV industry, they would sometimes put Jewish supporting characters in their stories. Their underground comics colleagues, however, often brought their Jewish characters center-stage, telling stories that were shocking in their audacity and sometimes just as crude as their Golden Age predecessors.

Then we come to the current crop of Jewish comic-book writers and artists. Gone completely are the green cigars, the street-kid lingo, the reliance on old-fashioned superhero convention. Absent, too, is the self-consciousness about Jewish identity. Today's Jewish comics professionals wear their ethnicity proudly on their sleeves. They tell stories of Jewish life in their comics as though it were no big deal. And to them it isn't. Some of them work on intimately personal graphic novels with one hand while crafting high-concept superhero yarns with the other. They're intellectual virtuosos, stylishly dressed, and perhaps even a tad *over*educated. If they own the rights to their characters, an unthinkable notion in the Golden Age, said characters have probably been optioned by a production company or film studio with an eye toward developing a movie franchise. Yes, times have changed for the Jewish comics professional. If only the King could see them now.

ARIE KAPLAN
Queens, New York
November 2007

Part One The Golden Age

(1933–1935) THE *BIRTH* OF THE *COMICS*

FAMOUS FUNNIES

Famous Funnies #1, the first monthly comic book to be sold on newsstands.

In 1933, the world went through seismic changes in the dual worlds of politics and pop culture. On the one hand, FDR was inaugurated and Hitler became chancellor of Germany. On the other hand, television was patented. And perhaps most unassumingly during this banner year, an unemployed former teacher named Maxwell Charles "Charlie" Gaines (né Max Ginsberg) had come to a career crossroads. Gaines was pondering how on earth he would be able to feed his wife, Jessie, and their two young children, Elaine and William. Like many other aspiring businessmen, he had tried many get-rich-quick schemes, such as painted neckties emblazoned with the anti-Prohibition proclamation "We Want Beer," but none had gifted him with the wealth or prominence he had so desired. After hitting rock bottom, Gaines and his family moved back to his mother's home in the Bronx. To lift his spirits, he began reading some of the Sunday funnies stored in the attic. These moldy old newspaper strips, tattered and yellowing though they were, still held a certain magical allure for the would-be entrepreneur. Reading them for the second time was almost more fun than that all-important first read-through, because now he could savor every detail of the lush artwork and colorful narrative at his own leisure. Suddenly the idea hit him: if *he* enjoyed reading old comic strips so much, maybe the rest of America would, too! Perhaps they would enjoy a whole book of comic strips, a "comic book" of sorts. Of course, people had repackaged newspaper comic strips in book and magazine form as far back as the 1890s, when collections of strips like Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* had been published. However, Max Gaines's main innovation lay in realizing that there was a business to be made out of these comic-strip reprints, that people would buy these comic reprint magazines on a regular basis—if only the product looked tantalizing enough.

Gaines shared his idea with his friend Harry L. Wildenberg, who worked in the sales department at Eastern Color Printing, the

company that printed many of the Sunday newspaper comics sections in the northeast. Eastern had experimented with the idea of reprinting Sunday comic strips since 1929, but those were mere hastily assembled tabloid-size giveaways. Gaines saw two areas in which these comic reprint booklets could be improved. First, one could actually charge money for these booklets, a thought that had never occurred to the folks at Eastern. They simply didn't realize that today's children might pay money to read reprints of old comic strips! Second, one could reduce the comic-strip reprint magazines to half tabloid size to make them more appealing to both the public and potential advertisers. Gaines started out by releasing several experimental one-shot comic books sponsored by companies like Kinney Shoe Stores and Canada Dry. These prototypes boasted titles like *Funnies On Parade* and *A Century of Comics* and were given away as premiums throughout 1933–34. They were enormously popular promotional tools for their sponsors, giving Gaines and Wildenberg what they needed: a successful track record. With this in mind, the two friends persuaded Eastern Color Printing to take a chance on the concept. In February 1934, ECP published *Famous Funnies* #1, Series 1, the first American retail comic book to be distributed to the public (rather than given away as a premium). The "half-tabs" were given a test run of 35,000 copies, and a nervous ECP actually refused to release the comic books to newsstands, relegating them to chain department stores. The books sold out immediately. They were an immediate success among children, who loved the reprinted Sunday strips like *Joe Palooka, Mutt and Jeff,* and *Hairbredth Harry* that could be found within.

In May 1934, Eastern Color Printing published *Famous Funnies* #1, Series 2, which was the first monthly newsstand comic book. It was cover-dated July 1934, and this set the precedent of comic books being dated two to three months after the date they were actually put on newsstands, the better to ensure that the comic book doesn't go out of date within weeks and instead enjoys a shelf life of two or three months. In many comic-book companies, this practice is still followed today. This monthly newsstand edition of *Famous Funnies* sold well, but not as well as its predecessor; it actually lost $4,150.60. It would take seven more issues before *Famous Funnies* was to turn a profit, making $2,664.25, and the title remained in the black for the rest of its run. The fact that it took seven issues—basically six months—for *Famous Funnies* to turn a profit wasn't unusual in the magazine publishing world, and in fact later comic books also took a few issues to get going; *MAD* sold horribly until issue #4, at which point it suddenly became a hit. However inauspicious its beginnings,

Famous Funnies was the only regularly published comic book for the rest of 1934 and thus proved that comic books were a potentially big business with staying power.
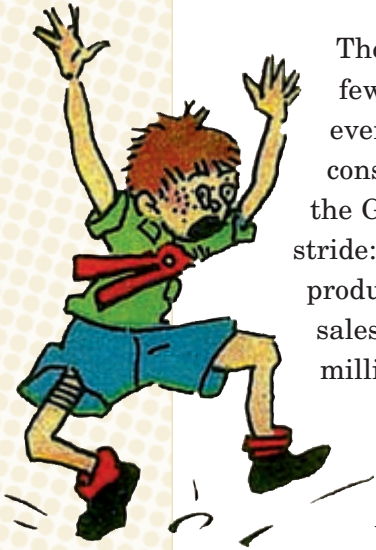
The emerging comic-book industry quickly became one of the few commercial success stories of the Great Depression. And even though *Famous Funnies* was the only title to see print consistently throughout that all-important year of 1934, by the Great Depression's end in 1941 the industry had hit its stride: by then, there were over 30 comic-book publishers producing 150 different comic books per month, with combined sales of 15 million copies a month, and a readership of 60 million. The comic-book was an instant hit in the juvenile publishing market, and Max Gaines had tapped into something powerful. Gaines wasn't a creative type; he never strove to establish himself as a cartoonist or a writer. His big innovation was as an entrepreneur, one who realized that comic-strip reprints could be repackaged into a moneymaking enterprise. As his son, the *MAD* publisher William M. Gaines, said in Ron Mann's 1988 documentary, *Comic Book Confidential,* "My father conceived the idea of taking the Sunday pages, folding them over, and folding them once again, and ending up with something roughly the size of today's comic book." The content of these newfangled comic books also resonated specifically among the nation's youth. Comic books (also known as "funny books") were roughly the size of pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Argosy* that had been gracing newsstands since the 1890s. Pulp magazines, like comic books, specialized in lurid tales of high adventure and intrigue, often with a science-fiction or fantasy bent. However, the pulps were intended for adults. Comic books, by contrast, were geared specifically toward kids. The youth of America finally had their own specialty literature that they could buy at any newsstand. Remember, this was before children's magazines such as *Disney Adventures, Nickelodeon Magazine,* and *Highlights for Children.* Perhaps most important, the "half-tab" size of comics like *Famous Funnie*s distinguished them from free tabloid-size Sunday newspaper supplements; the earlier experimental attempts at the comic-book format had failed because they lacked this distinction. Comic books' half-tab format also enabled publishers to fit twice the material on each page, saving printing costs and thus making comic books more of an economically savvy operation than their Sunday supplement counterparts. *Famous Funnies* continued for another 216 issues over 20 years, eventually reaching a peak circulation of 400,000 copies before ending its run in 1955.

Though Max Gaines helped reverse Eastern Color Printing's fortunes, one day late in 1934 he was unceremoniously sacked. The reason for this remains a mystery; if Gaines knew, he never told anyone. Ever resourceful, Gaines soon learned that the McClure Newspaper Syndicate had a pair of idle two-color presses, and he struck a deal giving McClure 50 percent of the proceeds if they would let him use their presses to print a new comic-book title, also composed of reprinted color newspaper strips, under the banner *Popular Comics*. *Popular Comics*—which published old favorites such as *Dick Tracy, Little Orphan Annie,* and *Gasoline Alley*—was direct competition for *Famous Funnies,* which contained the same type of material but couldn't boast the printing quality of its slick new competitor. Gaines capitalized on his end of the enterprise by entering into a lucrative deal with George T. Delacorte of Dell Publishing, who ironically had published the first experimental comic-book prototype giveaways for now-rival Eastern Color Printing in 1929.

Anticipating that the novelty of recycled newspaper comics would eventually wane, Gaines was anxious for something new to capture his readers' imaginations. But his anxiety was fueled by factors other than market savvy. There were only so many newspapers in the United States at the time, and comic-book publishers were already starting to exhaust the backlog of daily and Sunday strips that could be reprinted. And the newspaper syndicates sometimes charged astronomical royalties to reprint their comic strips. New, previously unpublished material would soon be needed to fill up the pages. At the same time, the once mighty pulp magazines were waning in popularity, and their distribution companies (namely American News Company and Union News) were looking for new material to fill magazine racks. Comic books looked like they might be an effective substitute. As far back as 1933, coinciding with the debut of Gaines's own *Funnies on Parade,* the Chicago firm Consolidated Book Publishers had released a black-and-white comic book containing original material called *Detective Dan: Secret Operative No. 48,* by the artist/writer Norman Marsh. It only lasted one issue, but the character made the leap into newspapers that September as *Dan Dunn,* and Marsh's creation enjoyed a 10-year run as a comic strip. Original material in comic books had, at the very least, potential. Gaines and his colleagues were soon clamoring for young talented cartoonists hungry for their first big break. Many of these young artists were hungry not only for industry experience but also for money to feed their families. Many of them lived in ethnic ghettos and were first-generation Americans. And many of them were Jewish.

LEGER AND REUTHS

Action Comics #1, the comic book that single-handedly transformed a fledgling medium into a multimillion dollar industry. Art by Joe Shuster.

By 1935, the former pulp magazine writer Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, the publisher of the fledgling National Allied Publications (soon to be known as National Periodicals, then Detective Comics Inc., and then simply DC Comics), had already begun a search for original strips to feature in his comic books. He lacked the funds to reprint newspaper strips, and therefore DC was the first publisher out of the gate to debut with predominantly new material. DC's first title, *New Fun Comics,* premiered in February 1935, boasting material that was definitely new but not particularly well crafted or memorable. Barely remembered features such as "Ur, the Caveboy" were simply pale imitations of newspaper comic strips (in this case, V. T. Hamlin's caveman strip *Alley Oop*). Early issues of *New Fun* also boasted such forgettable—and self-explanatory—fare as "Sandra of the Secret Service" and "Don Drake on the Planet Saro." With bland storylines and stiff artwork driving sales down the drain, it seemed *New Fun* was doomed. However, in the pages of *New Fun* #6 (October 1936), a brash supernatural detective named Doctor Occult first appeared and kicked some much-needed life into the fledgling title.
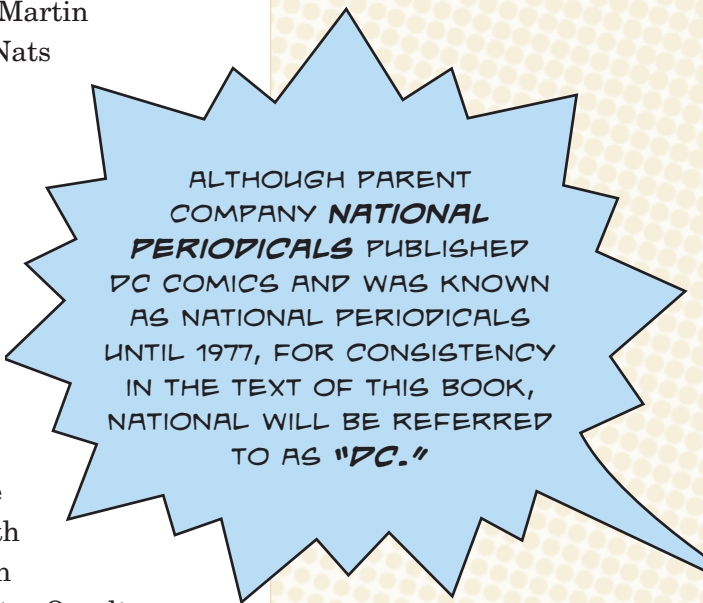
Before *The X-Files, Hellboy,* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* there was Doctor Occult, the "ghost detective" who battled vampires, ghosts, and sorcerers with the help of a handheld disk dubbed the "Mystic Symbol of the Seven." The good doctor was the creation of two prolific, idealistic Jewish kids from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Siegel wrote the scripts and his lifelong friend Shuster drew the pictures, and finally there was a *New Fun* hero who was distinctive, original, and a hit with the public. However, it's also worth noting that Doctor Occult was not credited to Siegel and Shuster, but to "Leger and Reuths," unlikely pseudonyms the pair chose because they also created the short-lived *New Fun* swashbuckler "Henri Duval of France, Famed Soldier of Fortune." By having the pair

write different features under different bylines, DC could make its talent pool seem that much bigger and itself look more impressive. This was a common practice in those days, and in the 1940s, a young Jewish writer/editor at Timely Comics named Stanley Martin Lieber chose a variety of pseudonyms, including Neel Nats and Stan Martin, to make it seem as if he weren't just one guy doing all the work. Eventually, he settled on a pen name that stuck: Stan Lee.

Doctor Occult, when stripped of his trademark trenchcoat and fedora, had squinty eyes, closely cropped black hair, a heroic build, a lantern jaw, and a cleft chin. And starting in October 1936 in issues #14–16 of *More Fun Comics* (*New Fun Comics* became known as *More Fun Comics* with issue #7), Siegel and Shuster dressed Doctor Occult in a red cape and blue costume and endowed him with super strength and the power of flight. There was no mistaking that in this three-issue story arc, the cape-and-tights-clad Doctor Occult resembled a certain Man of Steel that today's comic-book readers know all too well. But in 1936, the only two people who knew about Superman were Siegel and Shuster, who had created the character three years prior but had unsuccessfully shopped it around to every newspaper syndicate in the Big Apple. Since they hadn't been able to get Superman published, they were clearly trying out certain "Superman-ish" ideas in their Doctor Occult feature. However, it wouldn't be long before someone would finally buy their Superman character, and the world would thrill to the exploits of a champion who embodied the ideals of "Truth, Justice, and the American Way."

In 1937, Sheldon Mayer, then a teenage cartoonist, editor, and production man at the McClure Syndicate (and the future creator of the DC features *Scribbly* and *Sugar and Spike*), told his boss, Max Gaines, about an original comic-strip proposal that had been floating around for four years. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the strip had been rejected by every New York newspaper as being too fantastic even for juvenile audiences. One of the opening images depicted a caped muscleman in red and blue tights lifting an automobile above his head as frightened criminals scattered like rats. This, of course, was Superman. But Superman's outrageous exploits weren't the strip's only problem. It was crudely drawn and broadly written, far below the standards of newspaper adventure strips such as *Terry and the Pirates* or *Flash Gordon*. The revered cartoonist, comics historian, and graphic novelist Will Eisner, who at the time ran the

ALTHOUGH PARENT COMPANY *NATIONAL PERIODICALS* PUBLISHED DC COMICS AND WAS KNOWN AS NATIONAL PERIODICALS UNTIL 1977, FOR CONSISTENCY IN THE TEXT OF THIS BOOK, NATIONAL WILL BE REFERRED TO AS *"DC."*

Eisner & Iger Studio with his partner Jerry Iger and packaged comic book content for his client publishers to distribute, dismissed the young Siegel's and Shuster's creation as too crude. "I told them they weren't ready for prime time," Eisner recalled, laughing at the memory. "So much for my sound editorial judgment!"

Mayer convinced Gaines (who happened to be DC Comics's print broker) that this Man of Tomorrow would be the next big thing in comic books. On instruction from Max Gaines, Siegel and Shuster hastily cut and pasted several Superman strips into comic book format. Gaines then sent the strip to his colleague Donenfeld, who together with his partner Jack Liebowitz had recently taken over DC Comics from the financially strapped Wheeler-Nicholson. Donenfeld, though skeptical of the project, nevertheless had enough trust in Gaines's marketing instincts to take a risk. It didn't hurt that Siegel, and Shuster had a good track record at DC, having created not only Doctor Occult but the even more popular Raymond Chandler-influenced private eye Slam Bradley. Like Dr. Occult, Bradley laid claim to the rugged features that would later distinguish Siegel and Shuster's Man of Steel. As Jerry Siegel would tell the comics historian Rick Marschall in August 1983's *Nemo* #2, "We just couldn't resist putting into Slam Bradley some of the slambang stuff which we knew would be in Superman if and when we got Superman launched." Slam Bradley debuted in the premiere issue of what was then DC's most successful title, *Detective Comics,* in March 1937. In early March 1938, Donenfeld published the first Superman comic as the flagship feature of his new title *Action Comics,* which was cover-dated June. Sure enough, Superman took off like a rocket. (Or a bird, or a plane …)

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

SUPERGOLEM

Conceived by Siegel and Shuster while they were still in high school, Superman was the first comic-book character to successfully cross over into other media. The 1942 George Lowther book *The Adventures of Superman,* illustrated by Joe Shuster and his Cleveland studio, marked the first time a comic-book character was the protagonist of a novel. And Harold Prince's 1966 musical *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman* was the first—and as of this writing, the only—time a comic book character has served as the title character of a Broadway stage production. This is in addition to the various movie serials, feature films, radio shows, animated cartoons, and Internet comics that have featured the Man of Steel's exploits. Superman has even influenced popular music, as shown by recording artists such as the rapper Eminem, who has a song called "Superman" on his 2002 album *The Eminem Show,* wherein he compares himself to the Man of Steel. Every generation since the early 1940s has had a film, stage, or television adaptation of Superman to which they can look forward. And the Jewish community has taken pride in the character's Jewish origins: Superman's writer/co-creator Jerry Siegel is listed in the book *Jewish 100* as one of the 100 most influential Jews of all time, alongside Moses, Steven Spielberg, and Henry Kissinger. But Superman didn't spring to life fully formed, like the Greek God Zeus. Rather, his creation was one of fits and starts, of revisions and rewrites. And it all started with two poor kids just trying to find their niche.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both born in 1914. They met in 1931 while students at Cleveland's Glenville High School. Shuster, a Toronto native, had recently moved into the neighborhood, and Siegel, upon hearing that the new kid in school was a cartoonist, rabidly sought him out, looking for an artist to illustrate his scripts. The two were ardent science-fiction fans with a shared love of magazines like *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales,* as well as newspaper strips like Dick Calkins's *Buck Rogers* and Hal Foster's version of *Tarzan.* The pulpy tales of space fantasy and jungle intrigue fueled the young duo's

Superman was the first comic-book character to cross over into other media and, to date, he's the only character to appear in his own Broadway musical.

imagination, and they hoped to use their artistic talents to rise above their unfortunate economic status. Bespectacled, nerdy kids who were slight of build and shy around girls, Siegel and Shuster clung to each other as blood brothers. To this end, the duo began collaborating on various ideas, most of them for the high school paper, *The Glenville Torch.* Jerry wrote a series of humorous short stories about a Tarzan parody character called "Goober the Mighty," aided by Shuster's wacky illustrations. "Goober" was their first attempt to create a musclebound alpha male, even if the character was tongue-in-cheek. They would revisit the theme of a superstrong hero many times before they stumbled onto their famed red-and-blue-clad creation.

The first time the duo named a character Superman was in the pages of their self-published magazine *Science Fiction,* subtitled "The Advance Guard of Future Civilization," edited by Jerry Siegel and art directed by Joe Shuster. The third issue of *Science Fiction,* dated January 1933, contained a prose story called "The Reign of Superman," written by Siegel with illustrations by Shuster. The story concerned Bill Dunn, a homeless man who had been turned into a bald, megalomaniacal villain (a physical conceptualization that foreshadowed Superman's future foe Lex Luthor). After being taken into the home of the mad professor Earnest Smalley, Dunn is given food and clothing, then drugged. Smalley has slipped a strange substance into Dunn's coffee, a chemical extracted from an outer space meteor (foreshadowing kryptonite, the alien rock that robs Superman of his strength). A groggy Dunn immediately jumps out into the city streets, where he realizes that he can suddenly hear people's thoughts! Then he finds he can hear and see battles going on in outer space. Experiencing sensory overload, he passes out, and when he wakes up he finds that he has become … something else. Henceforth calling himself "The Superman," Dunn's mental powers increase exponentially, and he plans to use them to achieve great wealth. A jealous Smalley tries to duplicate the experiment on himself, but he is murdered by Dunn, who wants the power exclusively. Dunn disrupts a peace conference as the first step toward global domination, but at the

last moment his powers wear off, and he disappears into the streets whence he came, once again a forgotten homeless man. Siegel wrote the story under the pen name Herbert S. Fine, combining his mother's maiden name with the name of his cousin who had first introduced him to Shuster. And he put a seemingly meek journalist into the story, a character that foreshadows Clark Kent. Siegel named this reporter Forrest Ackerman, after a science fiction fan he had befriended. Ackerman would later achieve fame as a writer, editor, and literary agent who coined the term "sci-fi" and edited the well-known magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland.*

In those days, however, Ackerman was merely a young science fiction fan hoping to someday "turn pro," as were fellow *Science Fiction* contributors Mort Weisinger and Julius Schwartz. Both Weisinger and Schwartz would later gain fame as two of Superman's most legendary editors, and, like Siegel and Shuster, they were both working-class Jewish kids. Schwartz had contacted Shuster by writing him a letter telling him how much he liked his artwork. Before the comic-book conventions and comics specialty shops that started in the 1960s and 1970s, organized fandom didn't exist. Fan magazines like *Science Fiction* were one of the only ways for sci-fi buffs to communicate and bond. But even though *Science Fiction* was technically a mere "fanzine," the two budding comics creators took their work seriously and even tossed a high-minded philosophical allusion into the mix. Siegel and Shuster had derived the name "Superman" from *"Übermensch,"* a term coined in 1883 by the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to describe an individual who has battled the corruption of modern values and overcome his own flaws to arrive at the peak of intellectual and creative ability. The term would later become associated with the Nazi notion of Aryan superiority, but at this point, it was a term associated with Nietzsche's philosophy and nothing more; still, the term's Nazi associations are quite ironic considering that the most famous "Superman" in history was created by Jews.

After *Science Fiction* was canceled with issue #5 early in 1933, Siegel and Shuster moved onto other projects, most of them proposals for newspaper comic strips. One of their more memorable ideas was the *Buck Rogers*-style "Interplanetary Police," which they touted in the pages of *Science Fiction* but which went nowhere. A common criticism from the syndicates was that the duo's concepts weren't sensational enough. With this in mind, Jerry Siegel started to brainstorm concepts that would make syndicates sit up and take notice. And inspired by that sole issue of *Detective Dan: Secret Operative No. 48* that had been released that same year, Siegel and Shuster were elated by the prospect

of publishers looking for original material in comic books. They put together a complete comic-book story entitled "The Superman" and submitted it to Consolidated. This Superman was a crimefighter, not a criminal. Superman needed to be more sympathetic to sustain a regular series, and so Siegel and Shuster made the character a hero. Consolidated was receptive and even implied that Superman would debut in the second issue of *Detective Dan.* However, that second issue never materialized, for unknown reasons. Consolidated never published another comic book and the sensitive Joe Shuster took the incident to heart, burning the whole Superman story. Siegel was only able to salvage the cover art from the flames, and it's from this cover that we know Superman had now been transformed into a good guy: we see him swooping out of the sky in a now-familiar pose, ready to pummel a criminal who's got a helpless shnook bound and gagged at gunpoint. And the shnook? Clearly he was drawn by Shuster to resemble Siegel. However, this Superman doesn't look exactly like the character we know today; he appears to be bare-chested and lacks a cape. And even though he looks like he's emerging from out of the heavens to fight evil, from Siegel's and Shuster's testimonials it appears that he must have been simply leaping from a tall building because they were quite firm in their resolution that the character should have no superpowers. Soon, of course, they changed their minds.

In this 1984 pin-up, the former Batman artist Jerry Robinson pays tribute to his old friends Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (who can be seen near the cluster of microphones) and their character Superman. Note the caricatures of many celebrities, including Woody Allen, Cher, Michael Jackson, and Mayor Ed Koch.

HOLY COBRA, BATMAN! I THINK THE JOKER AND PENGUIN ARE UP TO SOME NEFARIOUS TRICK!

One night in 1934, Jerry Siegel was the victim of insomnia, which he worked through by crafting a third new character called Superman. Siegel's mind was awash in adolescent power fantasies; he recalled his lack of success with women. What if he were really terrific? Flush with excitement, he showed his script to Shuster early the next morning, and his creative partner quickly churned out design sketches fully visualizing the character. This Superman's powers were physical rather than mental. And aside from Nietzsche's "Super" name, the influences that drove Siegel and Shuster to create the Superman we now know today were myriad indeed. Before Superman, there had been elements of similar characters in popular fiction. Siegel and Shuster were riffing on Lester Dent's adventure hero Doc Savage, the star of dozens of pulp novels who was known as the "Man of Bronze" and whose full name was Clark Savage. To add to the

similarities, both Doc Savage and Superman have arctic lairs that each calls his "Fortress of Solitude." And even more than their "Goober the Mighty" character, Siegel's and Shuster's Superman is clearly indebted to Edgar Rice Burroughs's noble, musclebound Tarzan, who would often swoop in to save the day in a style the Man of Steel would ape (pun intended).

But while Doc Savage and Tarzan influenced Superman, they existed in pulp magazines and prose novels respectively. Other Superman influences like Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* and Lee Falk's *The Phantom* held court in newspaper strips. No such "superheroic" character yet existed in comic books. Siegel's and Shuster's innovation lay in distilling elements of the fictional characters they had grown up with and creating something new. As opposed to Doc Savage, who was all too human, Superman would be from another planet. And therein lay Siegel's and Shuster's most innovative touch; unlike Flash Gordon, an Earthman who battled aliens, Superman was *an alien masquerading as human!* Here the young writer-artist combo had deftly subverted genre convention by flipping it on its head. With a simple dramatic touch—the quintessential American hero is really an otherworldly creature hiding among us—Siegel's and Shuster's new character possessed the spark that had been missing from their previous Superman characters.

Then there's the issue of Superman's costume. Prior to Superman, there had been caped costumed characters, like Zorro and The Phantom, who wore masks and had secret identities, but here was a character with a real reason for having a secret identity: he was not one of us! He had a real, dramatic need for privacy, or else he would explode from the stress of being "Super" 24/7. Thus, the human identity would be the façade. Unlike Zorro, the Phantom, or later characters like Batman, Superman's "mask" consisted of his Clark Kent face—in other words, his glasses. Superman's real face was … well, Superman.

Superman's superpowers actualized the wish fulfillment fantasies of its creators, two Jewish, Depression-era kids craving a muscle-bound redeemer to liberate them from the social and economic impoverishment of their lives. But is there more to the character than fantasy and fisticuffs? Superman has recently been seen by pop culture scholars as the ultimate metaphor for the Jewish experience. However, there

Superman was obviously influenced by the pulp novel character Doc Savage, whose name was also Clark. Savage was the "Man of Bronze," not unlike the "Man of Steel."

has been some debate as to whether Siegel and Shuster intended to imbue their blue-and-red-clad savior with Jewish overtones. When one thinks about the fact that the Man of Steel is the traditional hero character who is unaware of his own powers and heritage until he comes into his own during adolescence, the Superman story is no more Jewish than that of Hercules, King Arthur, Luke Skywalker, Buffy Summers, or Harry Potter. All the aforementioned characters progress along a similar heroic path, that of a special individual raised by common folk who stumbles upon his/her birthright and embarks upon what Joseph Campbell (the author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth*) called the hero's journey.

However, in Superman's case, there are many Jewish signifiers in evidence. This may have been planned by Siegel and Shuster, but it may also have been subconscious. For one thing, not only is Superman a "strange visitor from another planet," he is more specifically the last survivor of said planet, and therefore a refugee. Like many Jews, he came to America to escape the extinction of his people. In Superman's case, he came to America because it happened to be on Earth, a planet his parents thought contained a breathable atmosphere. But the parallels are still there. Superman, though an alien, can pass as one of us, even though he is an immigrant—in fact, the ultimate immigrant, the supreme stranger in the strangest land, and thus the supreme metaphor for the Jewish experience. His parents send him to Earth in a tiny rocket ship, reminiscent of how the baby Moses survived Pharaoh's decree to kill all Jewish newborn sons. And in the context of the 1930s, when Siegel and Shuster created him, Superman can be seen as a child survivor from the planet Krypton, whose population, a race of brilliant scientists, is decimated in a Holocaust-like disaster. If read a certain way, the Man of Steel's backstory also reflects the saga of the *Kindertransports*—the evacuation to safety of hundreds of Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Europe. Later, Siegel would revisit this Holocaust metaphor in the 1962 Superman story "One Minute of Doom," about the Krypton Memorial Day, in which survivors of the doomed planet observe a moment of silence. Krypton Memorial Day could certainly be a metaphor for Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

And Clark Kent's signature attributes—bespectacled, bookish, mild-mannered—could be a burlesque of Jewish stereotypes. However, in this case, they were probably just a reflection of how Siegel and Shuster felt about themselves. The legendary political cartoonist Jerry Robinson (of the comic strip *Life With Robinson*) spent most of the 1940s as Bob Kane's ghost artist on Batman. Robinson was friends with Siegel and

Shuster in those days. "I knew Jerry and Joe very well in the old days," he recalled. "And I liked them very much from the beginning as individuals and as creators. One time Joe worked at the next table from me at DC Comics, and Jerry would come in from time to time and work there. Jerry wasn't married then, but he was going to be soon. But Joe was a perpetual bachelor, and we would go on several dates together. I had the assignment of getting Joe the date, because Joe was very shy, very reserved, very unassuming. He was short and had glasses. You'd never know he was the co-creator of Superman!" Just as you would never know that Clark Kent was Superman, because all you would see was a stoop-shouldered guy with glasses.

Subconsciously or not, Siegel and Shuster occasionally worked Jewish references into their character. Consider the fact that Superman's real name is Kal-El, which roughly means "All that God is" in Hebrew—quite an accurate description of the angelic Superman. By contrast, the name Superman chooses when he is incognito, Clark Kent, is notably bland and WASPy. Like many of the era's Hollywood stars (e.g., Paul Muni, aka Muni Weisenfreund), he Americanized his odd-sounding name to fit in. And then there's the fact that the core concept behind Superman—a mythic champion meant to deliver us from evil—reminds us of one of the most enduring Jewish legends, as noted by the author Michael Chabon, who won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay.* Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay are two Depression-era comic-book creators reminiscent of Siegel and Shuster, as well as other Jewish comics creators such as Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. And as Chabon makes clear, there's a parallel between Siegel's and Shuster's Superman and the Golem, the legendary creature magically conceived by Rabbi Judah Loew of medieval Prague to defend the community from attacks by its anti-Semitic enemies. The rabbi had only to construct a man of clay and place a special name of God on its tongue, and *voila!* Instant Golem. The creature would spring to life and come to the aid of the ghetto Jews. In *Kavalier and Clay,* the young Josef Kavalier is faced with the task of smuggling the Golem out of Europe; clearly, this event had an effect on Kavalier's later work as a superhero cartoonist. Thus, Chabon is saying that just as Joe Kavalier was influenced by the Golem, so too were real-life Jewish comics pioneers such as Siegel and Shuster.

The cover of Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. Chabon's Pulitzer Prize winning novel was clearly inspired by the lives of Jewish comics creators like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Jack Kirby, and Joe Simon.

The Escapist: © Michael Chabon. Used with Permission.

From the story, "The Passing of the Key" by Michael Chabon and Eric Wright, which appeared in the first issue of the comic book series Michael Chabon Presents The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist, published in 2004 by Dark Horse comics. Note the chain links forming a swastika.

Will Eisner also viewed Superman as a mythic descendant of the Golem, and thus a link in the chain of Jewish tradition: "[Jews needed] a hero who could protect us against an almost invincible force. So [Siegel and Shuster] created an invincible hero." Al Jaffee agrees, saying that the terrible daily life experienced by a tribe of nomads only made it natural for the Jews to fantasize that a Golem—be he from Prague or Krypton—would deliver them from evil. "The Jews have always been in some form of danger, and no matter how hard they try, no matter what they did for the gentile world, or the Arab world, or whatever world they were living in, they couldn't get away from an inquisition," he said. "They couldn't get away from discrimination and starvation and everything else that was heaped on them. [They were] blamed for the plague, blamed for the blood [libel]. After awhile, when you realize there's no way you can [endear] yourself to this hostile world so that they'd leave you alone, you have to start creating some kind of mythical fantasy creature that's going to come along and save you from the horrors of life. Life was horrible for these people! They're always in an alien land, so that's why they invented Golems!" Jaffee sees Superman as not only an updated Golem, but also as stemming from a desire to embrace a messianic figure. "Who is the Messiah? The Messiah is Superman, a Super-God. I think that's a great part of Jewish history, the need for a Messiah. And of course in modern times, the Messiah turns into Superman."

Since Superman first saw print in 1938, this of course raises the question: what if the Jews of Europe had had a super-powered champion to save them from the Nazi atrocities? In 1998, artist/writer Jon Bogdanove (*Man of Steel, Alpha Flight*) joined writer Louise Simonson (*Power Pack*) in answering that question just in time for Superman's sixtieth anniversary. Together, the team crafted a three-part story arc in the Superman title *Man of Steel* (issues #80–82, 1998) in which the superhero literally becomes a Golem, helping to defend the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. Two of the children in the story, Baruch and Moishe, are clearly reminiscent of Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Baruch and Moishe are mysteriously compelled to draw pictures and tell stories (respectively) about an "angel" who "would save us," a caped and costumed celestial who looks like a certain Man of Steel. When Superman actually does show up in 1938 and helps the Jewish resistance combat the Nazis, stormtroopers flee from the Man of Steel , complaining to their superiors about this fearsome "Golem." Bogdanove feels that both the Golem subtext and the Holocaust subtext of Superman are definitely

In Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, two Golden Age cartoonists create a Captain American-style superhero called "The Escapist. The novel's success led to the creation of an actual *Escapist* comic book by Dark Horse Comics.

The idea of a comic book embracing the Golem legend is now so main-stream that even Gumby has gotten in on the act. Heck, he *is* made of clay ...

present in the character's DNA, whether his creators realized it or not: "In one sense, when you look at comics, it's pretty hard to deny that everything in comic books is a hyperbolic metaphor, just like everything in myths are a hyperbolic metaphor. So it's pretty impossible to deny that fact. Yet, in the creation of it, in the majority of cases, it's not *consciously* being designed as a metaphor. In the majority of cases, it's being designed as a story that's interesting. But why is it interesting to the creator? It's interesting to the creator because it's a parable for something real to them!" Clearly, something about this Golem-like figure resonated with Siegel and Shuster.

It certainly resonated with the rest of the American public. Superman was the first true phenomenon in the then-fledgling comic-book industry. The character was only one of a handful of comics features in *Action Comics* #1, yet he may as well have had the entire title all to himself; readers kept requesting "that magazine with Superman in it!" Siegel's and Shuster's innovative mix of newspaper strip derring-do and pulp magazine fisticuffs weaved a spell on audiences that even their creators couldn't have anticipated. From a design standpoint, the costume Shuster crafted for Superman, reminiscent of a circus acrobat's colorful tights, became the standard upon which all other superhero costumes were based. Appearing in the wake of Lee Falk's *The Phantom* and his ilk, Superman was hardly the first hero to don spandex. Yet Shuster's distinctive spin on such a costume—cape, tights, boots, symbol on the chest, underwear on the outside—has been widely imitated ever since. Moreover, the powerful image on *Action* #1's cover showed a caped figure lifting a car over his head and smashing it as a handful of criminals flee. Such a display of superhuman strength! It left comics readers enthralled. Keep in mind that no one had ever heard of Superman before, so when you first looked at that cover, you didn't know whether this caped character was a hero or a psychopath, since you didn't know that the fleeing goons were criminals until you started reading the story itself. All you knew was that this Superman was powerful. And you wanted to read more about him and what these terrified people did to incur his mighty wrath.

Inside, the first 13-page Superman story is of interest for a number of reasons. For one thing, just as in "The Reign of the Superman," Siegel's penchant for social justice is in evidence. In "Reign," Siegel

explores the problem of rampant homelessness caused by the Great Depression; thanks to this epidemic, Siegel posits, men like Bill Dunn are susceptible to manipulative bastards like Professor Smalley. Similarly, within the pages of the initial Superman story in *Action Comics* #1, Siegel checks off a veritable shopping list of society's ills, which Superman then corrects. The tale begins with the Man of Steel breaking into a governor's mansion to show him a signed confession and thus stop a wrongly accused woman from being executed. The Man of Steel then wipes the floor with an abusive spouse, warning the lout that he has his eye on him. Then, after the reporter Lois Lane rebuffs the hoodlum Butch Mason's advances, Butch and his goons kidnap her and drive away. Superman stops Butch's vehicle, overturning it and shaking out the occupants (the image reenacted on the cover) while saving Lois. And finally, after learning that a prominent Washington senator is in a crooked lobbyist's pocket, Superman grabs the lobbyist and leaps across telephone wires, attempting to deliver him to the Capitol. But this early in the character's run, Siegel and Shuster hadn't given Superman the power to fly. And so when Superman underestimates the distance he would have to run to make the leap, he falls. Will he survive?

Aside from providing readers of the 1930s with an ending influenced by the popular cliffhanger movie serials of the day (à la 1936's *Flash Gordon* serial starring Buster Crabbe), here Siegel and Shuster have their Man of Tomorrow battling capital punishment, spousal abuse, organized crime, and political corruption. And all in the space of 13 pages. It's not too far a stretch to surmise that Siegel's and Shuster's obsession with social justice came from their Jewish background. Jewish ethics largely revolve around the concept of *tikkun olam,* or healing the world, and though this isn't an exclusively Jewish ideal, a strong concern for social ills is found in the work of many Jewish writers, artists, and performers, among them the playwright Arthur Miller, the author Norman Mailer, and comedian Lenny Bruce. And in the early decades of the 20th century, this obsession with *tikkun olam* led some Jews to embrace the ideals of the Communist Party, which they had been mistakenly led to believe would provide a viable solution to so many problems. The late, legendary cartoonist and satirist Harvey Kurtzman (creator of *MAD*) was born a "red diaper baby," and the cartoonist/comics historian Trina Robbins (creator of *GoGirl!*) describes her Yiddish journalist father as having been "at least Socialist." Even DC publishers Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz both came from strong Socialist and liberal backgrounds and were major supporters of the Jewish Defense League, B'nai Brith, and many other charitable organizations, both Jewish and secular. In fact, Liebowitz's Socialist stepfather Julius was an organizer for the International Ladies

Garment Workers Union, an idealist whom the writer Gerard Jones dubs a "protector of women and children" in his 2004 book *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book.*

Jerry Robinson remembers Siegel and Shuster as not just being interested in societal reform but also in self-betterment. "Jerry, Joe, and I went out together all over New York, and often we'd go to lectures," he recalled. "One day, we saw an interesting promo outside a school downtown for a course in philosophy. We thought, 'Gee, that might be interesting!' So we signed up for this course, and it was fascinating. It wasn't until much later that I found out it was a Communist school!! I think it was the Jefferson School of Social Science, if I'm not mistaken. It was a school mostly staffed by Communists, and this professor's name was Howard Selsam. He had a fine academic background and had written books. But that was very curious, to have Batman and Superman attending a course on Communist philosophy!"

In Siegel's and Shuster's case, this fascination with social problems came from their own youth during the Depression. These two knew what it was like to go without, and they smartly felt that if Superman shared their empathy, it would make it easier for readers to relate to their Kryptonian hero. Although the first several issues of *Action Comics* saw Kal-El dealing with labor relations, foreign dictators, and drunk drivers, after his first year of adventures Superman's agenda moved farther and farther away from Siegel's and Shuster's "man of the people" model and closer toward the now familiar formula of costumed supervillains, giant killer-robots, and would-be alien conquerors. He still helped the downtrodden, but there was also a heaping helping of whimsy in the stories. By 1941, mad scientist characters like the Ultra-Humanite (who debuted in 1939) and Lex Luthor (who first appeared in 1940) were increasingly the norm. And while DC's editorial regime encouraged this shift in tone, a wise move considering that their young readers cared more for whimsical fantasy than the plight of the working man, there is something sad about the fact that Superman abandoned his endearing "Socialist cheerleader" phase so abruptly. Like many successful celebrities, he went from being a man of the people to a leader of men.

Jerry Siegel once opined that the difference between Superman and all the Superman clones developed by rival publishers throughout the years was that the pretenders to the Super throne lacked the Man of Steel's empathy for the downtrodden. He was probably right, because directly after Superman hit the stands, the clones started to emerge, and very few had staying power.

ATTACK OF THE CLONES

In 1939, Superman, the first comic-book superhero, also became the first comic-book character to have a title named after him. Before this, comic books bore titles like *More Fun Comics, Action Comics, Adventure Comics, Detective Comics,* and so on. These rather generic-sounding designations were purposefully vague, because in those days each comic book housed five or six short features, which could be any combination of humor, adventure, Western, or any other type of strip. If Superman's debut in *Action Comics* #1 had tanked, for example, *Action Comics* #2 would have included another feature in Superman's place. *Superman* #1of the summer of 1939 was different, however. DC clearly had enough faith in its colorful Man of Steel to make him the star of his own book, even if he still starred alongside a handful of other features. However, in this case, he had a permanent day job in *Superman* and couldn't be booted out if the book didn't sell well. Not that that was an issue.

On January 16, 1939, even before he got his own title, Superman made his debut as a daily newspaper strip. This must have excited Siegel and Shuster, who had originally developed the character for the newspaper syndicates. And McClure's handling of the Superman strip was not a coincidence. It was the McClure executive Max Gaines who, on the advice of his assistant Sheldon Mayer, had originally recommended Superman to DC. McClure allowed DC to oversee the editorial supervision of the Man of Steel's newspaper strip, an unusual amount of creative freedom for a comic-book publisher (comic books were considered far below newspaper strips on the creative totem pole). Siegel and Shuster, meanwhile, had sold the rights to their character to DC in 1938 for $130, their flat fee for that first 13-page story in *Action Comics* #1. By late 1939, they were paid regularly for writing and drawing Superman's adventures in *Action Comics, Superman,* and the newspaper strip.

By any standard, this was a good deal of steady employment for the two formerly impoverished kids, but they had signed a work-for-hire contract. This meant that Superman's creators had reduced themselves to the status of hired guns on their own character and received no

Superman was the first example in comic books of synergy. "Hey, kids, eat your corn flakes and you'll get muscles like this!" (Well, exercising and cutting out junk food wouldn't hurt either....)

licensing fees, ownership, or residuals. This would later cause quite a bit of turmoil for both Superman's creators and DC. And starting early on in Superman's *Action Comics* run, a portion of Shuster's income went toward paying the art assistants that made up his Cleveland-based studio. This was the only way he could meet the harsh deadlines brought on by working on his various Superman-related projects (and it didn't help that even in those days, his eyesight wasn't that great). Some of these assistants, such as Ira Yarbrough and Wayne Boring, would establish themselves as brilliant Superman artists in their own right. Meanwhile, Superman's licensing fees were being paid to DC publisher Harry Donenfeld's corporation, Superman, Inc. And soon those fees started stacking up. In 1939, membership buttons for the Superman of America club were created. If you paid the dime membership fee and joined, you also received a certificate and were eligible to enter contests and win prizes like Superman sweatshirts and rings. Also in 1939, the actor Ray Middleton was hired to portray Superman at a personal appearance during the New York World's Fair (the theme of the fair, fittingly enough for Superman—sometimes known as the Man of Tomorrow—was "the future"). Middleton was the first actor to play Superman, but far from the last. By the early 1940s Superman toys, radio shows, and animated cartoons were all the rage. There was no denying it: this Man of Steel was powerful. And several other publishers sought to duplicate that power.

Victor Fox was a cigar-chomping braggart who looked at the cash cow that was Superman and decided he wanted some milk. Before long, he started his own company, Fox Features Syndicate. Not being a writer or artist himself but knowing what he wanted, Fox hired Eisner & Iger Studio, a shop run by Will Eisner and S. M. "Jerry" Iger, known for "packaging" comics. That is, Eisner and Iger (and their stable of artists) were routinely hired to write, draw, edit, and art-direct comic books for publishers and distributors who lacked an in-

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BY 1940, a veritable mountain of **Superman** merchandise burst through the floodgates of America, and the Man of Steel's kiddie constituency could claim a host of items such as puzzles, dolls, metal and wooden figures, bubblegum cards, candy, coloring books, and underwear. Also in 1940, *The Adventures of Superman* radio show debuted, starring Clayton "Bud" Collyer; it was a massive hit and would run until 1951. Because licensing in one area (e.g., Superman trading cards) would often spur interest in that of another area (e.g., *The Adventures of Superman* radio show), Superman has been credited by the comic-book historian Les Daniels, in 1998's *Superman: A Complete History,* as one of the first licensed characters to popularize what is now known by media conglomerates as synergy.

In another example of synergy, the Superman radio show introduced several elements into the Superman mythos that were soon incorporated into the comics, such as the supporting characters Perry White and Jimmy Olsen and Superman's ability to fly. In his pre-1940 adventures, he could simply leap great distances.

house art staff. But when Fox scribbled a handwritten memo telling Eisner what he wanted the talented young cartoonist to conceive—a superhero with tights and a red cape—Eisner balked. It seemed a little too blatantly close to Superman. However, Iger told his partner to take the assignment anyway; after all, money is money, and Victor Fox was offering too much money to refuse. So Eisner begrudgingly created the character Fox requested, and in *Wonder Comics* #1, May 1939, Wonder Man debuted. As Eisner predicted, DC sued shortly thereafter, and Eisner was subpoenaed. Both Iger and Fox demanded that Eisner tell the court that Wonder Man was *his* idea, not Fox's, which was the only way Fox would pay Eisner and Iger the $3,000 he owed them. Eisner struggled with this moral dilemma; what should he do? In the end he held fast to his principles, and when called as a witness he admitted that Fox literally instructed him to copy Superman. DC won the case in 1940. Fox was livid, didn't pay the $3,000, and Eisner and Iger struggled to catch up financially for some time afterward. But at least Eisner could sleep at night. Meanwhile, Victor Fox continued trying to gauge the interests of the comics buying public, and during its brief run as a comics company Fox Features published the exploits of various other superheroes during the 1940s, including Phantom Lady, who was more known for her stunning cleavage than anything else (and who is now, ironically, a character owned by DC).

Another superhero who was accused of being a Superman clone was Captain Marvel, who made his debut in Fawcett Comics' *Whiz Comics* #1 in February 1940. Captain Marvel, created by the writer Bill Parker and the artist C. C. Beck, was in reality young Billy Batson, a mere child. When Billy invoked the name SHAZAM (an acronym for several biblical heroes and Greco-Roman deities, such as Samson and Hercules), he became Captain Marvel, a muscle-bound galoot with red tights, a white cape with gold trim, and a suspicious resemblance to the actor Fred MacMurray. Captain Marvel had his basis in magic, not science fiction like Superman, and Parker and Beck had clearly come up with an original creation that stood on its own. Captain Marvel's quirky cast of characters—such as the mad scientist Dr. Sivana, who calls Captain Marvel the "Big Red Cheese"—were arguably better developed than Superman's more straight-laced supporting characters, at least during the 1940s. DC, however, perhaps accustomed to other publishers
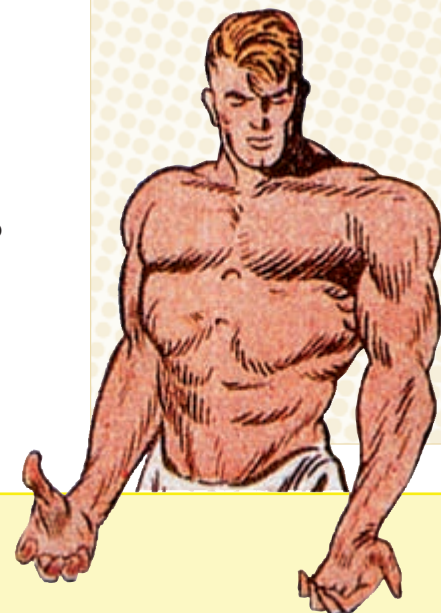
CAPTAIN MARVEL'S resemblance to Fred MacMurray wasn't that unusual. The first crop of comic-book characters were often modeled on notable personalities of the day, as Siegel and Shuster named Clark Kent after Clark Gable and modeled his mannerisms on those of Cary Grant. And of course, in the first issue of *Captain America,* Jack Kirby and Joe Simon based their scientist character Professor Reinstein on—who else?—Albert Einstein.

The story of Captain America's origin was a simple one: puny soldier Steve Rogers gets a shot in the arm that turns him into a superstrong Nazi fighter. For Jewish kids in the 1940s who felt powerless, this was the ultimate wish-fulfillment fantasy.

ripping off Superman left and right, or perhaps simply threatened by the competition, sued Fawcett. DC claimed that Captain Marvel was too similar to its flagship character. Several rounds of legal action between the two companies ensued over the next several years. Fawcett won the first lawsuit, but then DC sued again and won on appeal. Finally, Fawcett stopped publishing in 1953 and DC bought its entire catalogue of characters. Like Phantom Lady, today Captain Marvel is part of the DC Universe, and the Big Red Cheese even squares off against Superman from time to time.

But even if Captain Marvel wasn't an outright imitation of Superman, he was certainly influenced by the Man of Steel. And he was far from the only one. In the pre-Superman era, comic books generally featured detective characters like Siegel's and Shuster's own Slam Bradley, humorous characters like Sheldon Mayer's Scribbly, or characters who were imitations of whatever comic strips were in vogue that day, like the aforementioned Ur, the Caveboy. But now in the wake of Superman's 1938 debut, a new genre flooded the comic-book market: the superhero. And it seemed like every superhero was either indirectly or directly indebted to Siegel's and Shuster's star creation. "Superman wore a cape, so a lot of heroes wore capes after that," notes the legendary comics writer and former Marvel Comics publisher Stan Lee. "And since Superman wore a costume and had a double identity, if artists wanted to be successful, they thought, 'I guess we better give our characters costumes and double identities.'" Truly, the superhero genre had two fathers: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

A MULTITUDE OF CAPED HEROES did indeed follow Superman, including Doctor Fate, Starman, and the original Green Lantern. And just as Batman's secret identity was the rich playboy Bruce Wayne, the Flash was really the police scientist Jay Garrick, the Ray was in reality reporter Happy Terrill, Wonder Woman was the U.S. army major Diana Prince, and Captain America was the police officer Steve Rogers. And after Superman, a slew of characters had the suffix "-man" at the end of their superhero names, including Robotman (also a Jerry Siegel creation), Starman, Hourman, Hawkman, Doll Man, Minute Man, Bulletman, and Sandman.

Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel also developed other characters like the Spectre that are still an important part of the DC Comics pantheon. Art by Bernard Baily.

Let's backtrack

a little bit. In 1939, when Superman's success was still brand spanking new (and inspiring spanking new brands of licensed products), Max Gaines, the man credited with bringing the Man of Steel to DC, started his own comic-book company, All-American Comics. He named the publishing firm after his flagship title, *All-American Comics*, whose various features included the adventures of the Green Lantern (the alias of the radio announcer Alan Scott, aided by a magic ring). But even though All-American (also known as the AA Group) was separate from DC, the two companies advertised their product as part of one huge line, and both displayed the DC logo on their comics. All-American thus functioned as a sister company, expanding the DC world of characters by publishing titles such as *Flash Comics* (featuring the exploits of Jay Garrick, aka the Flash, doused with a super-speed serum and now the fastest man alive). In the pages of 1941's *Sensation Comics* #1, Wonder Woman, a sort of female Superman—she also dressed in a red, blue, and yellow costume and pretended to be a meek bespectacled wallflower in her secret identity—was created for All-American by the famed psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston, under the pen name Charles Moulton. The name was a nod to his friend Max Gaines, who was often called "Charlie." The main difference in attitude between the AA line and the DC line was particularly in evidence during the early days of World War II, before America was involved. In the stories that referenced the growing tension in Europe, DC's stance was liberal and humanitarian, pro-war from the point of view that we must help our allies. AA's philosophy was conservative and isolationist. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, however, both companies were completely in favor of U.S. involvement in the war, and the legend "Keep 'Em Flying" was patriotically emblazoned on both companies' books. Eventually, Gaines was bought out by Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz, not that readers could tell the difference. The then-fledgling DC Universe wasn't affected, and the characters went on their monthly adventures

without a hitch. But here we see DC fully engulfing another company for the first time to expand its catalogue of characters (as it would later with companies such as Fawcett). The powerful company was growing into an empire, built on the Atlas-like back of the Man of Steel.

Meanwhile, the rest of the comic-book business, whose future was on uncertain footing before Superman, was now a genuine growth industry. Publishers sprouted up almost overnight to challenge DC, and other companies like Timely Comics, Archie Comics, Fawcett Comics, and Quality Comics rushed like mad to create the next big Superman-style hit, hiring scores of young, talented writers, cartoonists, and editors.

A disproportionate amount of the talent brought into this fledgling industry was Jewish. A list of the major accomplishments of Jewish comics professionals during the comics' Golden Age reads like a list of the major accomplishments of the comics *industry* during this period. For example, in 1940, former Siegel and Shuster pen pal Julius Schwartz started editing the milestone title *All-Star Comics.* Why was it a milestone title? Because Winter 1940's now-famous *All-Star Comics* #3 featured the debut of the Justice Society of America, the first superhero team, composed of the Flash, Green Lantern, the Spectre, the Hawkman, Dr. Fate, the Hour-man, the Sandman, the Atom, and Johnny Thunder. Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, the real-life Kavalier and Clay, were known as the troubleshooters of the industry, constantly called on by publishers like Timely and DC to come up with new and inventive comics and to bolster flagging sales. Their creations from this period include Captain America, the Newsboy Legion, the Guardian, and the Boy Commandos. In 1940, when Simon and Kirby were on staff at Timely Comics (later to be known as Marvel), they were the direct superiors of an ambitious young writer named Stan Lee, who would become the Walt Disney of comics during

The Justice Society of America, created in *All Star Comics* #3 (1940), was the first comic superhero team.

One of the first comic book titles published by Timely Comics in 1939 was *Marvel Comics*. By the early 1960s, Timely would have gone through many name changes, eventually calling itself Marvel Comics!

the 1960s. Meanwhile over at Eisner & Iger, Will Eisner and his team of assistants created almost the entire Quality Comics line of characters, such as Doll Man, the Ray, Uncle Sam, and Blackhawk. Also during 1940, the artist Martin Nodell and the writer Bill Finger (both Jewish) teamed up to create the original Green Lantern, while Jerry Siegel co-created the Spectre. Both characters are still wildly popular DC mainstays. And this leads to the question: why were so many Jews attracted to the comic-book industry in its early days?

Simple socioeconomic factors played into the flood of Jewish Golden Age comic-book talent. Jewish artists, writers, editors, and publishers entered the field because other professional fields—including more prominent areas of commercial illustration—were virtually closed to them. "I think the factor that brought all the Jewish guys into [comic books] is that there was a tremendous amount of anti-Semitic bigotry as far as a lot of industries were concerned," explained the legendary *MAD* artist Al Jaffee, who started out as one of Will Eisner's assistants. "We couldn't get into newspaper strips or advertising. In newspaper strips occasionally the rare 'super-Jew' would break through, like [the legendary newspaper cartoonist] Rube Goldberg. But that was rare. And advertising agencies and slick magazines had art directors who were not Jewish. In a lot of firms, there was an unwritten policy that no Jews need apply, and we knew about that when we went looking for work. I mean, you went in and you sat down with your portfolio and the message came through clearly, especially when you ran into very nice people who would say, 'Look, your work looks pretty good and I wouldn't mind taking you in, but there's a policy here. We don't hire too many Jewish people.' It was a gentleman's agreement. Most of the time they wouldn't [come out and] say it, but now and again you ran into somebody who was really goddamn nice and said, 'Gee, I sure would like to give you a

break, but my ass would be on the line.' Jews were not easily accepted into these businesses. But the comic-book business did not discriminate. In fact, a lot of the comic-book publishers were Jewish, so the opportunities for getting work [were there], because you got rid of that one big bugaboo! I mean, my friends and I, when we got out of high school and talked about getting various kinds of jobs, some of them had graduated from CCNY and they wanted to go into engineering and banking and so forth, but they knew they were up against a tremendous barrier. Comics did not present that barrier of anti-Semitism. And it was just easy to get into it, and I think all the Jewish friends that I had, if they could draw at all, they went for it!"

Jaffee also admits that the shockwaves Superman sent through the industry made comic books seem like an exciting new place to be. "I got out of high school in 1940," he said. "So during those years comics were starting to boom! And since I'd always loved to draw cartoons, that seemed like a natural place to go." Jaffee's former boss Will Eisner reasoned that the comic-book industry's status—or lack there-of—also played a huge role, much as Jewish movie executives in the early days of the 20th century were attracted to the untapped potential of early motion pictures. "This business was brand new. It was the bottom of the social ladder, and it was wide open to anybody. Consequently, the Jewish boys who were trying to get into the field of illustration found it very easy to come aboard." For talented Jewish kids who had no gift for telling jokes (like the Marx Brothers), music (like Benny Goodman), or acting (like John Garfield), creating comic books appeared to be a way out of poverty and into a legitimate, hopefully lucrative artistic career. Eisner theorized that comic books were a perfect fit for young Jewish artists' sensibilities, given the centrality of storytelling in Jewish culture. "We are people of the Book; we are storytellers essentially," he claimed, "and anyone who's exposed to Jewish culture, I think, walks away for the rest of his life with an instinct for telling stories."

And just as Kal-El became Clark Kent to fit into mainstream society, many Jewish writers and cartoonists changed their ethnic-sounding names. Jacob Kurtzberg became Jack "the King" Kirby and went on to create or co-create Captain America, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, the
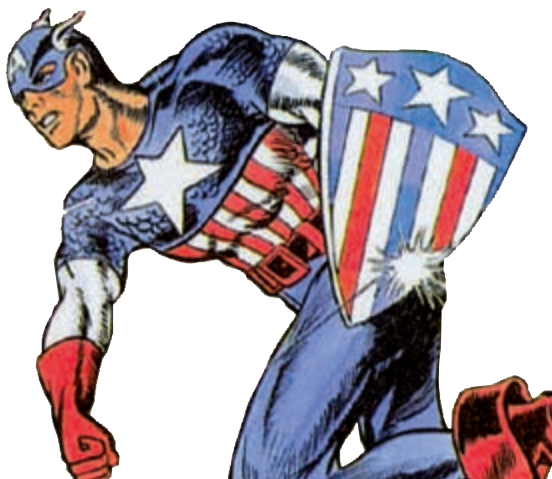
New Gods, Kamandi, Captain Victory, and whole universes of characters for DC, Marvel, Image, Pacific, and many other publishers. Stanley Martin Lieber became known as Stan Lee, and it was under this name that he served as Kirby's creative partner at Marvel during the 1960s, where he and the King co-created such famed characters as the X-Men, Nick Fury, Thor, the Silver Surfer, and the Black Panther. With artists such as Steve Ditko, Bill Everett, and Don Heck, Lee also co-created Dr. Strange, Spider-Man, Daredevil, and Iron Man. Robert Kahn became Bob Kane and went on to co-create a caped crusader called Batman.

The cover of *Captain America* #1 created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon.

It would be easy to say that these people changed their names out of hatred for their own ethnicity. But that just isn't true. Many Jews felt forced to change their names to avoid the anti-Semitic stigmas that came with an overly "ethnic" name, a name that could unwittingly provoke violence. In Will Eisner's autobiographical graphic novel *To the Heart of the Storm,* there is a scene in which a gang of street toughs poke fun at Eisner's kid brother Julian, calling him "Jew-leen!" When Eisner comes to his brother's aid, the kids beat the stuffing out of him. Eisner then looks angrily at his brother and declares, "From now on, your name is Pete … that's a better name for around here!" The story is true: Eisner's brother was known as Pete for his entire adult life.

Al Jaffee remembered a similar experience. "My name used to be Abraham," he said. "I was born in Savannah, Georgia. My parents had either a somewhat naïve or vicious sense of humor, because they named me Abraham in Savannah. And because of Abraham Lincoln, the name 'Abraham' in the 1920s in Savannah was an anathema. When I had to go to kindergarten, my name Abraham resulted in a little bit of torture for me. The other kids used to [beat me up]! And [as an adult], the name Abraham also had a cooling effect on any organization that had a practice of not hiring Jews." Then when Jaffee went into the army, an acquaintance convinced him to make the change. "When I was in the Pentagon and saw plenty of anti-Semitism, I was lucky that none of it was overwhelmingly

against me. But I saw other Jewish guys get beat up and stuff like that. And I met a Jewish fellow in the Pentagon one day and he said, 'Have you ever thought of changing your name? I just changed mine.' He had some name like Marvin Schitzberg, or Lipschitz, and he said, 'I'm getting tired of the "Schitz" jokes, and I changed it.' And I said, 'Well, how do you do that?' He said, 'You do it for nothing—just go to the judge advocates and you fill out a paper, and they do it. And it doesn't cost you a cent because you're in the service!' So I thought about it and I said, 'You know, maybe Jaffee would look better as an Al Jaffee than an Abraham Jaffee,' and so on a whim I went over there, filled out a paper, and suddenly I was Al! I didn't even know whether to be Al Jaffee, Albert Jaffee, or Allan Jaffee—so I picked Allan Jaffee, but in the back of my mind I'm sort of sorry I did it now. But [back then], in the back of my mind was, 'Maybe I'd like to go back to some of those advertising agencies and Al Jaffee will look better than Abraham Jaffee,' because then they wouldn't outright say to you, 'Are you Jewish? We can't hire you!'"

THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

Photograph of Will Eisner in 1942, when his comic strip, *The Spirit*, was at the height of its popularity.

One of the few Jewish comic-book creators who didn't change his name was Will Eisner. And from 1937 to 1940, while DC was steadily climbing the comic-book publishing ladder, the Eisner & Iger Studio created superheroes like Black Condor and Uncle Sam for publishers like Quality Comics and Fiction House. This sort of work was second nature for Will Eisner, who always knew that he wanted to draw pictures for a living.

The son of an Austrian émigré who painted stage sets, Eisner was born on March 6, 1917, and attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, whose other graduates included Stan Lee, the Batman creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger, and the writers Paddy Chayefsky and James Baldwin. As a kid during the Great Depression, Eisner hawked newspapers on the street to help out his family, and it was then that he started to become obsessed with the great newspaper strips of the day, including Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* and Elzie Segar's *Thimble Theater.* In 1933, he drew comic strips for his high school newspaper, *The Clintonian,* buoyed by the emotional support of his artist father, Sam. As soon as comic books started calling for original material, Eisner began to contribute. He created the pirate strip "The Flame" (later resuscitated as "Hawks of the Sea") for the short-lived *Wow, What a Magazine,* which went belly-up with issue #4 in November 1936. It was then that Eisner & Iger Studio, aka the Art Syndication Company, came into being, after Eisner met with the *Wow* editor Jerry Iger and outlined a plan to farm camera-ready comic-book features to client publishers. Because he supplied the money for the first month's rent on their studio, Eisner's name went first on the company letterhead. From their offices in the Tudor City building in Manhattan, Eisner and Iger churned out such characters as Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. Sheena was the first major female comic-book character, created by Eisner in 1938 under the pen name "William Thomas" for the Fiction House title *Jungle Comics.* Like Stan Lee at Timely and Siegel and Shuster at DC, Eisner often did much of his work under pseudonyms to make his company seem bigger than it actually was. Aside from William Thomas, his other pen names included Willis Rensie (Eisner spelled backwards), W. Morgan Thomas, and

Spencer Steel. But soon, he started employing assistants to help him take care of the heavy workload. Many of those assistants later became famous cartoonists in their own right.

A young Eisner & Iger assistant named Jack Kirby made his professional comics debut in the Fiction House title *Jumbo Comics* #1 (not to be confused with *Jungle Comics*). Kirby was born Jacob Kurtzberg on August 28, 1917, on Essex Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Kurtzberg's parents were (like Sam Eisner) Austrian immigrants, and his rough and tumble early life was the stuff of 1930s Warner Brothers gangster pictures. Kurtzberg's parents, Rosemary and Benjamin, were among two million Jewish immigrants who fled Europe to escape persecution, and who were welcomed by an America that desired cheap labor. At the time, nearly a quarter million people were packed into every square mile of the Lower East Side, making the ethnic ghetto one of the most populous places in the world.
Like Siegel and Shuster, young Jacob Kurtzberg was a child of the Depression. Kurtzberg's family was very poor, and his father worked as a tailor in a garment factory. The desperation of the inner city took its toll on "Jakie," who fell in with the Suffolk Street gang and became known as quite a scrapper. On one occasion, when a local politician sent a man to the Kurtzberg home to pay Benjamin money to vote as a Democrat, Jacob, who had been studying civics, threw the man down the stairs for corrupting his father. As the Lower East Side was the turf of the gangster Charles "Lucky" Luciano, many of Jacob's friends became gangsters. But he quickly realized that his heart didn't lie in rooftop fights with rival gangs. He loved reading and drawing, hobbies that made him the butt of his hoodlum friends' jokes.
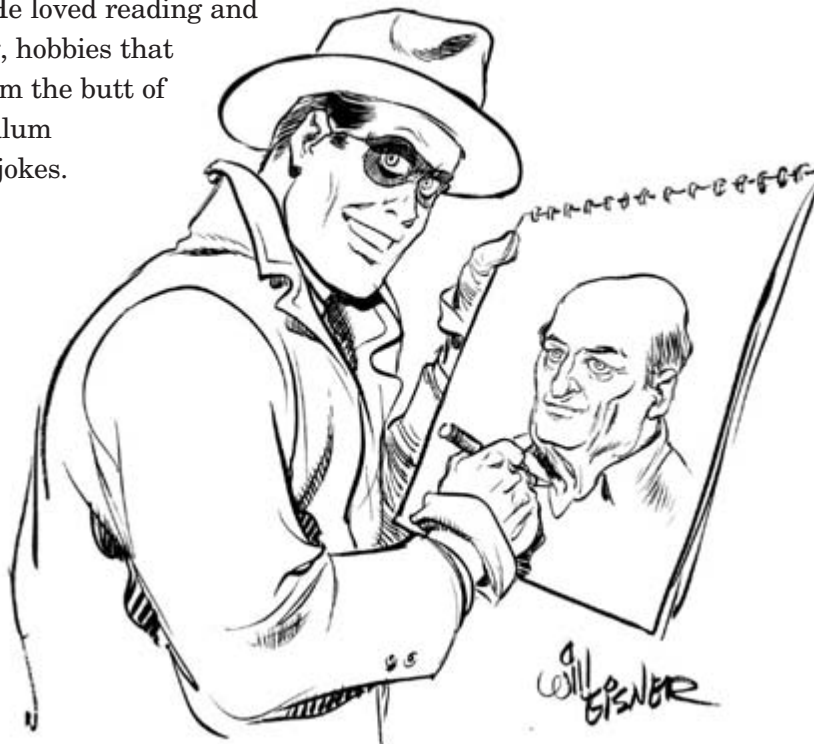
**That's so meta!
A portrait of the Spirit drawing his creator, Will Eisner.**

Soon, art became his refuge, a potential way to escape the dead-end world of the ghetto. And even though he would soon leave the Lower East Side behind, the violence of the streets would stay with him his whole life, informing the powerful action scenes for which he became so famous. Clearly, the "kid gang" characters like the Boy Commandos and the Newsboy Legion that Kirby and Simon created at DC during the 1940s were based on Kirby's childhood in the Lower East Side.

After all, the Boy Commando known as Brooklyn talks in a fractured locution that was a reference to the many street toughs Kirby grew up with. And Kirby, who, like Eisner, hawked newspapers as a kid, surely had this experience in mind when he titled one of his kid gangs "the Newsboy Legion."

At the age of 17, Kurtzberg got a job as an "in-betweener" (drawing the poses in-between the key frames for the lead animators) at the Fleischer Brothers studio, producers of Betty Boop and Popeye cartoons. Finding the work artistically stifling and feeling that it was no more creative than his father's labor in the garment factory, he departed the world of in-betweening and in 1938 walked through the doors at Eisner & Iger. "Jack Kirby was doing a classic comic for us," Eisner explained. "We were starting classic comics some time before the actual great Classic Comics [which would later be published by the Gilberton Company]. And Jack did an adaptation of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He worked in the shop for awhile. A nice, hard-working guy."

Aside from his *Count of Monte Cristo* comic (on which he was assisted by Lou Fine), Kirby's Eisner & Iger output included the medical feature "Diary of Doctor Hayward" and the Western feature "Wilton of the West." Though his stint at Eisner & Iger was brief (Eisner estimated it to have lasted "about six months"), Kirby made quite a lasting impression. In *The Dreamer,* his autobiographical 1986 graphic novel about the birth of comic books, Eisner depicts various characters who are thinly veiled surrogates for famous cartoonists, such as Ken Corn, who is a stand-in for the Batman co-creator Bob Kane, and Jimmy Samson, who is clearly Jerry Iger.

THE FLEISCHER BROTHERS Max and Dave had a connection to many of the Jewish comics legends of the 1930s and '40s. Not only did **Jack Kirby** start out as an in-betweener for the Fleischers, **Bob Kane** did as well. And in the early 1940s, Max and Dave Fleischer had **Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster** visit their Miami, Florida studios, where Joe drew concept drawings of the Man of Steel for the Superman animators to use as reference. The DC publisher **Harry Donenfeld** also visited the Fleischers' Miami studios in 1941 to see how the Superman cartoons were coming along. In a way, the Fleischer Brothers had much in common with the early comic-book giants. Like Kirby and Donenfeld, Max and Dave Fleischer were tough Jewish guys from New York. Thanks to the creative vision of the Fleischer Brothers and the $50,000 Paramount Pictures spent on the pilot, the 1940s Superman cartoons still hold up today as a touchstone in quality animation.

In one scene, the Eisner character, called Billy Eyron, calls the company that provides towel service to his studio and tells them that he's looking for a replacement. In those days, the Eisner & Iger bullpen was 15 men strong, and a towel service dropped off fresh linen towels every morning to the office washroom. In this case, the towel service was owned by the mafia. Soon after Eyron makes the fateful call, a typically imposing gangster-style goon appears on behalf of the towel service and tells Eyron not to make any trouble. Suddenly, from across the room marches a pint-sized pit bull named Jack King (obviously a Kirby surrogate), who sidles over to the broken-nosed goon and barks, "Don't pull any of that mob stuff around here!! Beat it, bum!" Eyron tries to hold the diminuitive King back, but to no avail. Soon the goon leaves, and King goes back to his drawing board, telling Eyron, "Y' can't let those mafiosi push you around!" Eyron, sweating profusely, can only say, "Okay, Jack, okay! Okay!" Meanwhile, at the bottom of the panel, Eisner's narration intones, "Comics is a world of bad guys and good guys … That is why Jack King is here." As with Eisner's "Pete" story from *To the Heart of the Storm,* the towel story was absolutely true, often recounted by both Eisner and Kirby on the lecture and comic-book convention circuit in their later years (using their real names this time). Eisner eventually had to kowtow to the towel service, but the experience taught him—as he says in *The Dreamers*—that comics is a world of good guys and bad guys. Apparently, Kirby put much of himself into the good guys he drew on the comics page.

Jack Kirby left the Eisner & Iger Studio due to the Wonder Man debacle. Because Eisner came clean on the witness stand rather than keep quiet as Victor Fox had intended, Fox refused to pay the rather large sum of money he had owed Eisner & Iger, and they couldn't afford Kirby's services any longer. Fox hired Kirby to work for him directly, and it was at Fox Features Syndicate that Kirby met his creative collaborator, Joe Simon, with whom he would go on to create his first crop of classic characters (including Captain America and Boy Commandos) that would catapult him into comics history.
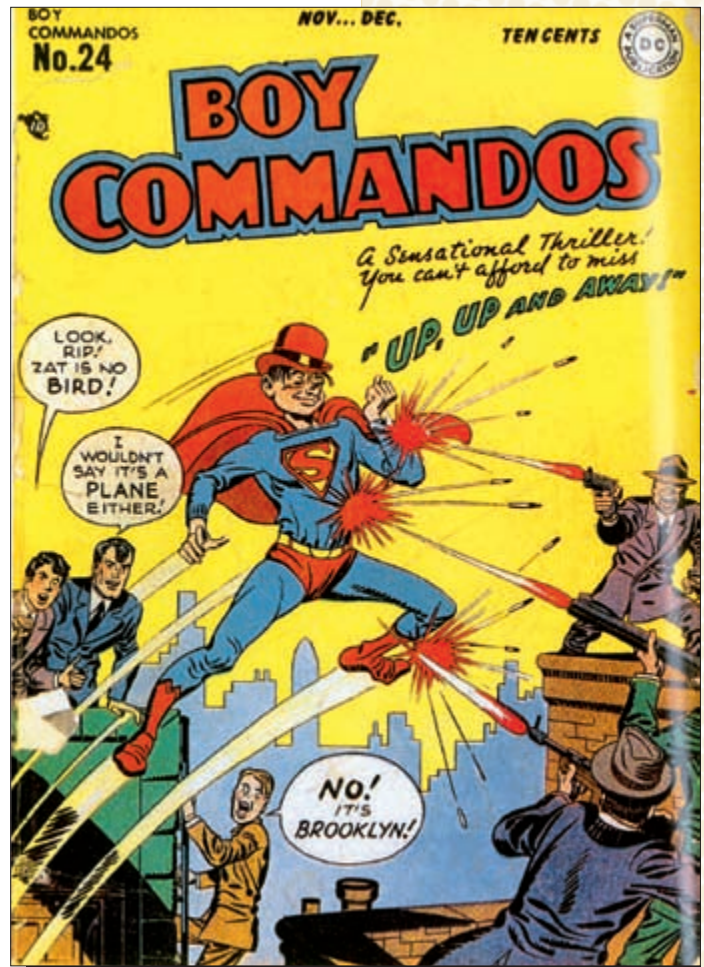
Superman was such an immediate, instantly recognizable hit that other DC Comics characters could get laughs by dressing up as the Man of Steel, as seen in this 1947 issue of Jack Kirby's and Joe Simon's *Boy Commandos.*
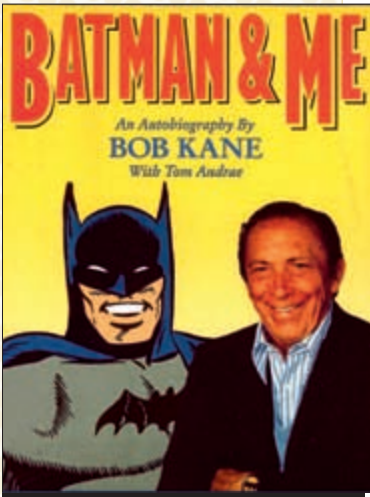
Then there was an ambitious—some would say opportunistic—young man named Robert Kahn, who, like Eisner, had contributed to *Wow, What a Magazine.* Kahn had recently changed his name to Bob Kane.

"[Bob] worked as a freelancer for us—he didn't work in the shop," Eisner clarified. "Bob Kane and I were high school buddies. And he showed up one day when we just started Eisner & Iger, and we put him on a feature called 'Peter Pupp.' It was a Disney imitation." But Kane didn't last long on the humor feature. Though he was a talented gag cartoonist with a facile comic mind, soon he had his sights set on the ever-expanding world of adventure comics. "Shortly after that, he called me up and said, 'I'm

On the cover of the autobiography of Batman's co-creator Bob Kane, Kane is pictured alongside a Batman illustration drawn some 50 years earlier by his assistant, Jerry Robinson.

leaving,'" Eisner recalled. "I said, 'Why are you leaving?' He said, 'You're only paying me five dollars a page. Donenfeld at DC Comics offered me [more money]!' I think they offered him seven or eight dollars a page to go do adventure features. I said, 'Well, Bob you can't do adventure, you don't know how to draw that well!' [He said], 'No I can do it, I can do it! I got a guy who's gonna write it [for me].' He had someone named Bill Finger. So he left! And he started a thing called *Batman,*" Eisner added with a laugh, "I don't know what ever became of *that.*" Did Eisner think when he hired the young Bob Kane that he would go on to develop something as long-lasting as the Caped Crusader? "At the time, I didn't think so," he admitted. "But he did, and he did very well with it, obviously. Actually, the creation of superheroes starts when the character is very very raw. I mean, Siegel and Shuster's early Superman was poorly done, based on the standards we have today. And they were primitive for the most part. So was Batman! But Batman was a good idea, and so was Superman. Anyway, superheroes of the day never remained what they were in the beginning. Matter of fact, the superheroes you have today have been done by a whole number of people over the years; none of them are being done by the original creator. So what you're seeing today are characters that were originally created because they're a novel idea, but they've been embellished and improved on, and so forth."

In the fall of 1939, Will Eisner was approached by Everett "Busy" Arnold, the head of Quality Comics, who arranged a meeting between Eisner and Henry Martin, the sales manager of Register & Tribune

Syndicate. Arnold had taken note of the staggering success of the comic book market, and Register was afraid that newspaper strips were in danger of losing their readership to this new medium. So Arnold, feeling that newspapers would do well to emulate comic books, offered Eisner the chance to create a free-standing "comic-book" supplement for newspapers (well before magazine supplements like *Parade* were common inserts in newspapers). As Register was well aware, Eisner had a solid work ethic and a healthy respect for deadlines. Eisner would create the newspaper supplement and its various features, and Arnold would print the newspaper supplement for Register. Eisner offered his 50 percent stock in Eisner & Iger to Jerry Iger, as per a prior agreement. Thus in 1940, Will Eisner debuted *The Spirit,* a 16-page newspaper insert section.

When the criminologist Denny Colt fakes his own death, he reinvents himself as a masked crimefighter, figuring that he's better able to serve the forces of good as the Spirit. Only the curmudgeonly Commissioner Dolan and his comely daughter Ellen know the Spirit's true identity. The fact that the Spirit's identity is hidden by such a small, flimsy mask is almost a joke in and of itself. Eisner had drawn the mask as a concession to Busy Arnold, who insisted that the artist bow to this superhero convention. As Eisner remembered it, Arnold maintained that a superhero had to have a costume. But Eisner drew the line at the Spirit's mask and notably didn't clothe the character in a cape or tight-fitting union suit à la Superman or Batman. Eisner would later say that as a Jew, it didn't really occur to him that the Spirit's origin story carried with it Christlike overtones. After all, Denny Colt does "rise from the dead," having faked his death, and he does operate out of a secret headquarters beneath a cemetery. But for Eisner, this was Denny Colt's Fortress of Solitude, his Batcave, and it bore no religious significance. There was nothing overtly spiritual about the Spirit.

Eisner decided to pursue Register's offer because of his feeling, common among cartoonists of the time, that newspaper strips were on a far higher artistic plane than the lowly comic book: "I went into *The Spirit* because I felt that this is literature, and I wanted to do literature. I did not want to do 'comic-book' [type] stuff. I didn't want to stay in what I regarded as the 'comic-book ghetto.' This was 1939. The Register & Tribune Syndicate came by and asked me if I would

The cover of one of Kitchen Sink Press's 1980s reprints of Will Eisner's *The Spirit.*

produce a comic-book insert for magazines and newspapers, Sunday newspapers. They weren't called comic books in those days, they were called 'comic magazines.' And I remember it was a very difficult decision at the moment because I was a partner in Eisner & Iger, and the company was doing extremely well, we were making a lot of money, and I had to make a decision. I had to leave Eisner & Iger. I couldn't do both, in other words. So I had to give up one. But the decision was made easier by the fact that this would be an opportunity at long last to work for a vehicle that would enable me to reach adults, so I could write adult stories. Remember, I grew up on pulps. I grew up on short stories. I was an avid reader. And I wanted, I needed I guess, to write this kind of material. And [*The Spirit*] gave me the opportunity to do it."

The Spirit did have a certain "pulp fiction" sensibility, from its hero's physique, which recalled Doc Savage, to Denny Colt's hat, which also reminded one of mysterious heroes like The Shadow and The Spider. Aside from 1930s pulp magazine characters, *The Spirit* was influenced by the great newspaper strips of the day. "The real influences, of course, were [*Terry and the Pirates* cartoonist Milton] Caniff, and Elzie Segar, who did *Popeye,*" Eisner admitted. "And the big strong influence on me was *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman. I grew up on that. I was selling newspapers in the '30s when I first discovered Herriman, and I was very fond of his work. I learned from all those three men things that I was able to employ in *The Spirit.*" The influences of these venerable comic-strip characters on *The Spirit* are immediately apparent, from Commissioner Dolan, who resembles Popeye, to the action sequences, which are indebted to *Terry and the Pirates,* to Eisner's constant experimentation with page layout and panel arrangement, clearly reminiscent of *Krazy Kat.*

The Spirit, Eisner's 16-page newspaper supplement (which also included other features like Eisner's "Lady Luck"), was an immediate hit upon its debut in 1940. But does this make Eisner one of Al Jaffee's fabled super-Jews? "Will Eisner's Spirit was so hot and so terrific that people took notice," replied Jaffee. "The bottom line with anti-Semitism is that it often tends to fade when the anti-Semite sees money rolling in. So, those barriers, believe me—anti-Semitic

Will Eisner's *The Spirit* would often play with our expectations, as in this cover illustration. What's going on here? Two Spirits? Hint: One of them is a dummy.

attitudes and bigoted attitudes seldom come down because people have an epiphany that it's the right thing to do. What they find out is that something that a Jewish guy is doing is selling like hotcakes, and so they start doing it."

When Eisner started working on *The Spirit*, he promised Jerry Iger that he wouldn't raid the Eisner & Iger talent pool, and only took with him three of the more than a dozen artists still working there at the time: Lou Fine, Chuck Mazoujian, and Bob Powell. Powell (born Stanislaus Koslowsky) was known for his anti-Semitic tirades. When Busy Arnold tried to steal Powell away from Eisner and Eisner wouldn't let him, Powell marched into his boss's office and accused Eisner of masterminding a "Jew trick" to hurt his career. However, in 1942, when Eisner entered the army, he received an uncharacteristically warm letter from Powell apologizing for any "nasty" things he might have said. Powell's anti-Semitic remarks were of course ironic, since not only were his bosses in the comics industry Jewish, so too were so many of his co-workers. Once Eisner started *The Spirit*, as with Eisner & Iger, he was assisted by an influx of largely Jewish talent.

And as with Eisner & Iger, the young Jewish cartoonists who assisted in the writing and drawing of *The Spirit* were a lodestar of future cartooning legends. Among them were the future *MAD* stalwarts Dave Berg (creator of *MAD*'s long-running "The Lighter Side Of …" feature) and Al Jaffee. Jaffee remembers that even then he had a preference for humor strips: "My first comic-book assignment was [a humor strip]. I created a comic-book feature called Inferior Man, and I went up to see Will Eisner. And he looked at it and for some reason, it intrigued him, so he said, 'How would you like to do filler pages for magazines that I package, and do Inferior Man?' He had magazines called *Military Comics* and *Uncle Sam* and *Plastic Man* and stuff like that, and I started doing one and two page fillers for those magazines. I think it mostly went into *Military Comics,* which was published by Quality. He was packaging for Quality at that time."

Jaffee explained that the process of "packaging" a book was a necessity in those days, whereas in this day and age, the very term is considered archaic: "'Packaging' means that he had a staff, he hired artists, he hired writers, they produced it. It's like with *Military Comics,* his writers and artists produced a whole magazine and handed it over to Busy Arnold, who sent it to his printer. Will Eisner undoubtedly got a set price for the whole comic book, out of which he paid all of us. That's the whole packaging business. I was [also]

packaging [the teen comic] *Patsy Walker* for Stan Lee at Timely, in which I did the whole book. Really, in comics [in those days], budgeting was limited, you know? You could do the whole thing, which includes lettering and coloring, in addition to writing and drawing; in my case, it was just writing and drawing. The lettering was done up at Timely comics, and the coloring was done there, and then they sent it to the printer. With Stan Lee there were a number of people like that. Morris Weiss [who did the Timely teen feature *Margie*] was like that—there were a number of guys whom he could give the whole comic book to them and say, 'Bring back the full 28 pages, or 32 pages of whatever we need,' and he didn't have to worry that this was going to be a disaster. They came back and they were ready to go to the printer, and all Stan Lee had to do was read it and hand it over to a proofreader and that was the end of it."

In those days, kids with little or no formal training were often thrown into the fray and asked to package whole books if they showed basic storytelling ability. Of course, in Eisner's shop, the boss himself had an unerring eye for quality, and he only hired the best. As Eisner acknowledged, even the kid who swept up in his studio went on to become a legendary cartoonist. This was Joe Kubert, then 11 years old, who would later co-create classic characters like Sgt. Rock. But in 1939, Kubert had gone to Eisner on the recommendation of Jerry Iger, who had kept the name Eisner & Iger for a time after Eisner left because he was stuck with reams of Eisner & Iger stationery that he didn't want to throw out. "The first job that I had was sweeping out Will's office," Kubert remembered. "He was writing *The Spirit* before he was drafted in the army. Will was doing *The Spirit,* and he gave me a job during the summer. And he allowed me to come up there and he had a bunch of guys working up there like Tex Blaisdell and Bob Powell, and I had the job of keeping up the place, cleaning other people's drawings, and learning what the place was about. Dave Berg was up there at the time, and he was just starting in the business." However, they weren't really close, because as Kubert noted, "Dave was a little bit older than I, and, you know, no one of 16 or 17 would make friends with an 11- or a 12-year-old." When Eisner entered the army, Joe Kubert officially joined the Quality Comics staff, and from November 1942 to December 1943, he was credited with inking—and then penciling—many *Spirit* installments. How did Kubert get such a plum job at this tender age? "It wasn't that difficult at that time," he shrugs. "Because you have to remember they were putting out 10 cent magazines, they were putting out 64 pages per magazine. And they had a lot of stuff that they had to get

done, and because of that, despite the fact that I brought up work that was atrocious, they would publish it simply because they had pages to fill. The five or six pages that I did were more than countered by the good stuff that came out and that gave me a tremendous opportunity to learn on the job, which is what I did. But the work was terrible—I would never, ever be able to get a job doing that stuff today, it would be impossible."

But perhaps the most famous *Spirit* assistant Will Eisner hired was the future playwright/screenwriter/cartoonist Jules Feiffer, who would go on to write the Broadway play *Little Murders* and pen the screenplays for such films as *Carnal Knowledge* and *Popeye,* in addition to creating the openly political comic strip *Feiffer.* From 1945 to 1952, Feiffer assisted in the writing of *The Spirit.* The story of how he got a job with Eisner is certainly one for the books, a story that involves both moxie and its Yiddish counterpart, chutzpah. Feiffer felt that the more recent *Spirit* stories paled in comparison to the pre-war ones, at least from a writing perspective. And being a gutsy young kid, Feiffer marched into Will Eisner's office and told the master so to his face. Eisner's response, in so many words, was "If you can write a better *Spirit* story, go home and do it!" So Feiffer did. And when he showed it to his cartooning hero, Eisner liked what he saw. "Feiffer came into the shop to work as a kind of general shop assistant," Eisner recalled. "He did coloring and backgrounds, and things of that sort. One day, I was up against the schedule, and I said, 'Jules, would you do these [dialogue] balloons? Finish the story for me.' Because I would write the story, generally, through the very ending. And I looked at the balloon he did, and I said, 'This guy's incredible!' So I gradually began putting him on writing the stories. Originally, he was filling out the balloons, finishing balloons for a story I'd started. Later on, he would [write] the whole thing. But he could draw well enough to do a rough of the story. Because the way we'd do a story in our shop was to start with big pencil roughs, sometimes we would do stick figures, and doing what you might call a storyboard, we'd lay out the story with stick

The Great Comic Book Heroes **was one of the first academic works to help legitimize comics as a serious art form. The book was written by the cartoonist/playwright Jules Feiffer, a former assistant to Will Eisner. (Cover art by R. Sikoryak.)**

figures and dialogue. [Jules and I] had a very good working relationship. We're still good friends to this day. And I admire what he's grown to be, and I admired him in the days he was in the shop. We had a good philosophical compatibility." As with Bob Kane, did Eisner have any idea at the time that Feiffer would go on to bigger and better things? "I don't think anybody thought of that then," he answered. "I thought he was good, and I thought he was competent, and I liked having him around, but if anybody said to me, 'Where's this guy gonna go?' [I would've said], 'I don't know!' And these days he's developed a fantastic style of art! [When he was in my shop], he never thought of himself as an artist, he was more interested in writing. His real skill was with words, he was brilliant on words. And he has been modest about his drawing, but he has no right to be, because the children's books he's been doing have been absolutely sensational! But I don't think he thought of himself as an artist in the sense of the 'bravura art' that we were all doing at the time."

Ever since Feiffer came into his own as an artist, he and Eisner had what might be termed a friendly rivalry, where the two publicly argued on various points. One was the Spirit's ethnicity. Since the Spirit was Eisner's attempt to distance himself from the two-dimensional, simplistic world of most comic books, the look of the strip contrasted greatly with the mise-en-scène of other costumed crimefighters. Whereas, say, Superman's world was pastel-colored and filled with sunny, sketchily rendered backgrounds, Denny Colt's world was dripping with rainwater and the inky smudge of film noir. The larger than life, realistically detailed architecture, the experimental camera angles, everything about the Spirit suggested that this was something different. His "costume" was a baggy suit, not the standard skin tight circus togs Superman or Batman might wear. And as Feiffer said in his landmark 1965 book *The Great Co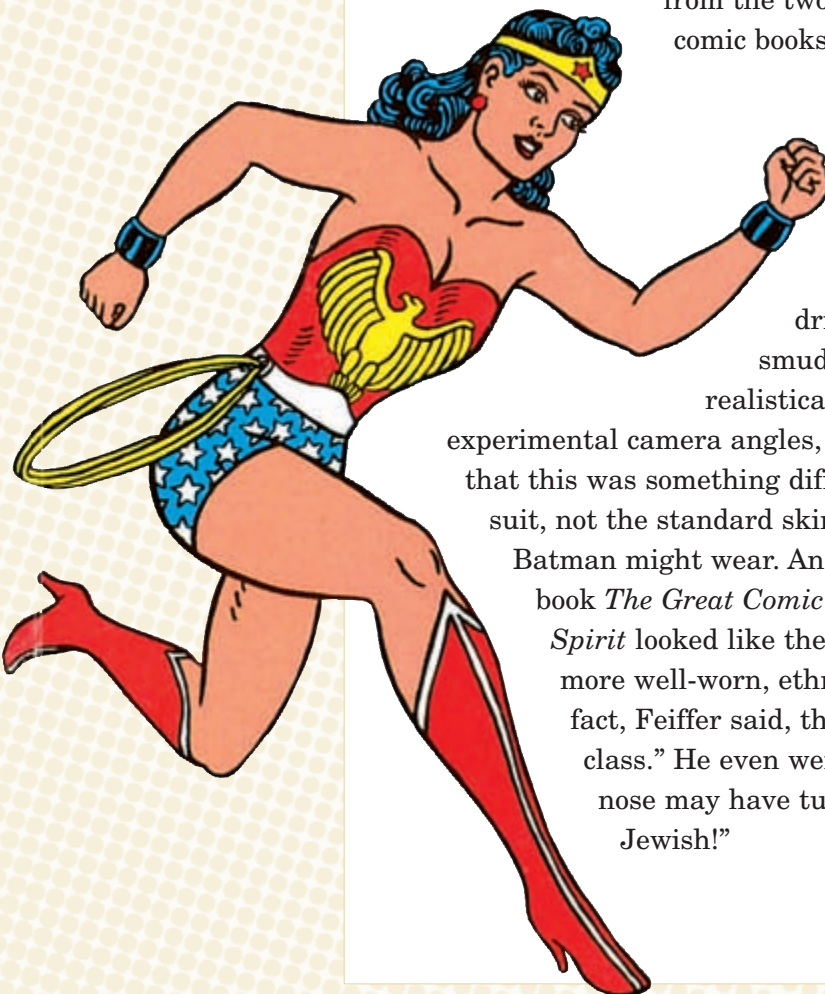mic Book Heroes,* the characters in *The Spirit* looked like they just stepped off the boat; they had a more well-worn, ethnic look than those in most comics. In fact, Feiffer said, the Spirit "reeked of lower middle-class." He even went so far as to say that Denny Colt's nose may have turned up, but "we all knew he was Jewish!"

Eisner strongly disagreed with this postmodern deconstruction of his most famous costumed character. "No, no! That's not true," he exclaimed. "I [also] remember Jules Feiffer giving an interview claiming that everybody knew the Spirit was really Jewish." Eisner felt that Feiffer's reading of Jewish subtext into the Spirit came from the fact that many of the Jewish comic-book professionals of the day did change their names to fit in, and perhaps Feiffer saw the Spirit as being a metaphor for a Jew assimilating into the larger American culture. "Remember, there was a strong threat of assimilation here," Eisner said. "Many of the Jewish artists in comics changed their names! Stan Lee was Stan Leiber, Bob Kane was Bob Kahn when I knew him, Gil Kane was actually Eli Katz, Jack Kirby was Jacob Kurtzberg. All these guys changed their names! They felt that if their names changed, it would be easier on them. Also, most of them at the time were selling artwork totally—they knew there would be no equity. So the only equity you could have possibly is the name that you own. But essentially, that was a little bit of the driving force. The fact that publishers put house names on stories like in pulp magazines added to the practice. Much of this stuff was not really known at the time; no one was aware of it at the time. What we're talking about is a sociological explanation for the things that happened."

Most artists of the era would agree: they were creating a product for general audiences and didn't try to sneak any sort of subtext, Jewish or not, into their work. If any Jewish symbolism did seep out, it was purely subconscious on the part of the cartoonist/writer involved. In fact, most comics professionals during the Golden Age of comics just saw comics as a way to pay the bills. They were trying to make a living, and it never occurred to them to layer their stories with any sort of symbolism or subtext.

During the Golden Age of comics, superheroes were only one of many genres competing for kids' attention. In this group shot, there's a masked adventurer (Americommando), a cowboy (Vigilante), a superhero (Superman), a magician (Zatara), and a jungle adventurer (Congo Bill).

THE LEADEN AGE

The Golden Age

The Golden Age of comics is so called because this was when the language of comic books was formed, when they first started to differentiate themselves—in style and content—from newspaper strips. From roughly 1938 to 1952, writers, cartoonists, and editors experimented with the very idea of how page layout, camera angles, characterization, storytelling, and iconography could most effectively be employed in comic-book pages. It was also when the genres most associated with comic books first took hold: humor, adventure, romance, western, science fiction, horror, fantasy, and, of course, superhero. The first wave of superheroes—stalwarts such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, the Flash, the Green Lantern, and so many others—were created during this era. Since comic books are more closely associated with superheroes than with any other genre—indeed, today they constitute a good 80 percent of the industry's content—there is good reason why the era in which superheroes first flowered is known as the Golden Age.

Many comics pros active during the Golden Age don't take the term seriously, however, especially since historians differ as to what year the Golden Age began. Some say 1933, others 1938, and still others might argue 1935. As Stan Lee quips, "I have no idea when the Golden Age was [supposed to have been], but as far as I'm concerned, wherever I am is the Golden Age!" And Will Eisner noted with a laugh, "Today you call it the Golden Age. Well, for those of us that were in the Golden Age, we didn't know it was the Golden Age! It was the Leaden Age as far as we were concerned!"

Congratulations, SUPERMAN! It's 45 years and you are even more SUPER than ever!

Joe Shuster 1983

By 1983, the Superman co-creator Joe Shuster was legally blind and this may have been his last drawing of Superman.

Eisner's comment underscores a bitter irony to the era. Many of these superheroes' creators began working in comics when they were penniless kids who had no idea that the characters they created would take off in such a major way. They couldn't afford lawyers, often didn't know they were being exploited, and didn't think twice when told that the work they were doing was "work for hire." Therefore, they never received proper financial compensation for their efforts. With few exceptions, they were underpaid wage slaves entitled to no rights and no royalties. There are simple reasons for this; the publishers, desperate to fill pages of their new "comic magazines," sought cheap labor, and these desperate, young (and frequently Jewish) kids naively signed away all rights to their work to their publishers. Unlike today's comics pros, they often didn't give a thought to ideas like royalties or residuals, and they didn't care so much about bylines or personal appearances, let alone getting a slice of ancillary merchandise.

An issue of 1930s pulp magazine *The Shadow*, featuring a character who was almost more frightening than the evil-doers he hunted. The Shadow was a huge influence on Bob Kane's and Bill Finger's Batman.

This is the irony, then, of referring to an era of cheap labor and exploitation as the Golden Age. Even Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were cheated out of the fortunes they surely deserved for creating Superman, the world's first superhero. Harry Donenfeld made a fortune on the backs of Siegel and Shuster, who sold the first 13-page Superman story for a mere $130, retaining no royalties or ownership of the character. The duo had to negotiate for possible financial and creative participation in the subsequent Superman comic strip and other spin-offs, while the juicy licensing fees were socked away in Donenfeld's corporation, Superman, Inc. From 1940–41 alone, Superman merchandise brought in approximately $1.5 million, worth at least three to four times that in today's dollars.

This is not to say that Siegel and Shuster were exactly down and out at this point. In fact, for comic-book professionals, they were doing marvelously well. When they sold their original 13-page Superman story to DC for $130 (which they split equally) and the character became a hit, Siegel protested what he felt was their exploitation. Donenfeld eventually agreed to let Superman's creators work on the newspaper strip for a share of the net (somewhere from 50 to 90

percent, according to varying reports), if they would work exclusively for him for the next 10 years at $35 a page. In 1942, Siegel and Shuster split around $150,000 between themselves and Shuster's staff of five assistants. Between 1938 and 1947, Siegel and Shuster are estimated to have earned somewhere in the vicinity of $400,000 (again, worth several times that by today's standards). However, they had no ownership or control of their character, and they were at the mercy of standard work-for-hire contracts from which they could be dropped at any time.

In April 1947, tired of the McClure Syndicate and Donenfeld making a fortune while their own income was waning (superheroes had taken a brief nosedive in popularity with the coming of peace in 1945), Siegel and Shuster took DC to court. Their aim was to regain the rights to their creation, cancel their contracts with McClure and Donenfeld, and recover $5 million in what they saw as lost income. The court awarded Siegel and Shuster a total of $100,000 for the character of Superboy (Superman as a teenager), which they had also created and which had debuted in 1945. However, they were denied ownership of Superman. And in 1948, they were fired from DC; their contracts were up, and besides, they were seen as troublemakers. What's more, their creator credits were taken off of Superman. No longer would the legend "by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster" appear in *Action Comics, Superman, World's Finest,* or any other Superman title. The one bright spot that year was Siegel's marriage to Joanne Carter (née Jolan Kovacs), who was the model for Shuster's preliminary concept drawings of Lois Lane in the 1930s. Shortly thereafter, Siegel and Shuster announced a new comic book, the humorous *Funnyman* (published by Magazine Enterprises), but this title lasted a paltry six issues. Siegel and Shuster, their money devoured by legal fees, had certainly fallen from grace. Shuster, his eyesight deteriorating since his early Superman days, was reduced to doing layouts and pencils for sub-par comics like Charlton's *Science-Fiction Space Adventures* in the 1950s. Siegel and Shuster were briefly retained as anonymous hired guns by DC in the early 1960s, but after Siegel attempted a new lawsuit in 1963, they were dropped again. Out of options, Siegel got a job as a mailroom clerk and Shuster was taken in by his brother Bern. They were destitute, even though they had created one of the greatest pop culture icons in American history.

The cover of *He Done Her Wrong*, by Milt Gross. When this was first published in 1930, the term "graphic novel" had not yet been coined; yet this comic novel (with no words) was one of the first attempts at a novel-length comics narrative. Gross also drew the Yiddish-inflected comic strip *Nize Baby*.

After their abandonment by the comic-book industry, Siegel and Shuster lost touch with many of their cartooning colleagues, including their old pal (and former Batman artist) Jerry Robinson. Then, in 1975, while working in his studio late one night, Robinson saw something on television that filled him with righteous indignation: "My assistant Bob Forgione and I were working on a deadline and [Tom Snyder's talk show] *The Tomorrow Show* came on. Jerry Siegel was in the audience, telling of his plight, that they lost everything, the whole sad story. That was the first time in years that I had heard from them, and I was really terribly upset. Jerry had been working as a postal clerk, and Joe was broke. It was terrible. Joe was certifiably blind at that time." Robinson, a past president of the National Cartoonist Society who served from 1967 to 1969, had previously helped out the duo with the NCS's Milt Gross Fund, a loan that helps industry professionals in financial need. Robinson had also heard a rumor that in the years since he had last seen them, Siegel and Shuster had settled with DC. Now he learned that it had been just that, a rumor.

As though Siegel and Shuster weren't bitter enough about their obscurity and impoverishment, now a new source of anxiety gnawed at them. It was 1975, and a *Superman* movie was about to go into production. This was to be a big-budget affair, helmed by the A-list director Richard Donner, with the stars Christopher Reeve, Marlon Brando, and Gene Hackman. "I immediately called Jerry in California," Robinson said, "and I told him how terribly I felt about the situation, and [asked], 'What could I do to help?'" Unbeknownst to Robinson, another *Batman* cartoonist—the superstar illustrator Neal Adams—had been recently attempting to assist Siegel and Shuster as well. "I called Neal and said maybe we should work *together* wherever we can and rally the profession, which we set out to do," said Robinson. "There was a comic-book organization, Academy of Comic Book Arts, and Neal went to them to get all the comic-book people." Meanwhile, Jerry Robinson contacted the National Cartoonist Society, whose membership includes over 500 of the world's major cartoonists, including people working in comic books, newspaper strips, film and TV animation, and commercial illustration. Robinson did what he could to encourage various public

THE MILT GROSS FUND was named for the famed Jewish cartoonist who created the Yiddish-inflected newspaper comic strip *Nize Baby.* Gross was also the driving force behind such comic strips as *Dave's Delicatessen* and *Count Screwloose of Tooloose.* His 1930 work *He Done Her Wrong,* a self-described "Great American Novel (With No Words)" is regarded by many as one of the first true graphic novels. And yes, Al Jaffee also considers Gross to be, like Rube Goldberg, a "super-Jew," one of the few Jewish cartoonists before World War II to find success in the largely gentile-owned world of newspaper comic strips.

figures to support the cause, including the author Pete Hamill (a former student of his at the School of Visual Arts), the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., the TV newsman Mike Wallace (an old tennis buddy), and his fellow cartoonists Will Eisner and Jules Feiffer.

On this cover from the *Black Book Detective* comic book is the pulp character The Black Bat, one of the most obvious influences on Bob Kane's and Bill Finger's Batman.

Robinson and Adams had their work cut out for them. There were many issues to consider—health care, pension, profit participation—all of which they were determined to win for the aging comic-book creators. Every day, either Adams or Robinson would call Siegel and Shuster to report on their progress. "A lot of the negotiating was done by phone between Neal, myself, and Jay Emmett, [then] VP of Time Warner," Robinson recalled. "It was a different generation, several decades after the original [Siegel and Shuster] contract was signed, so they didn't have the baggage that the original [company] did. Now DC was owned by a big firm and was more susceptible to pressure. Meanwhile, Jerry had already had a heart attack, and the main concern was to get some settlement for his daughter and wife before something happened to him. [Finally] Jerry said to me, 'I can't go on with this anymore!' So I said [to my lawyer], 'Settle it tomorrow, get the best deal you can get. It's better than nothing.'"

The sticking point was the issue of the creator credits. And knowing of Siegel's fragile health, Robinson decided to zero in on this aspect of the agreement. "I said to Jay Emmett, 'Restore their names, that won't cost you anything. These are human beings. They are proud of their creation.' And I played on every card that I needed for that. And finally he says, 'Jerry, let me call you back in an hour.' I knew what he was going to do, he was going to call his lawyers. He wasn't in a position to okay it himself, he had to talk to them every hour. He said, 'We can't restore their names to everything, but we can do it on *some* publications.' I said, 'No, Jay, you have to go all the way! Restore their names in all print matter, and the movie.' He said, 'No, I can't do that.' I said, 'Of course you can.' He calls back and says, 'Okay, I'll restore all print matter.' And with the movie he said, 'I can't do the movie, the credits are already all final in the film.' I said, 'Jay, I've worked on movies before. It's not like reshooting a scene!' He said, 'All print matter, and we'll get the credits on the film. But, I can't do the licensed products [like toys]. I thought that was the best possible deal and that's what we did. The big thing was that we got the names restored." Aside from having a byline on all print matter, TV productions, and feature films, Siegel and Shuster

each received $20,000 a year, as well as cost-of-living increases and provisions for their heirs.

The signing of Siegel's and Shuster's agreement took place, not coincidentally, right before Christmas, on December 23, 1975, a joyous ending to a year fraught with tension. Siegel, Shuster, and Robinson all decided to get together at Robinson's Manhattan apartment that night to celebrate. "I was coming out of the Time Warner office to get to the party and it was pouring rain," Robinson remembered. "We're all gathered around the TV set, watching the *CBS Evening News,*" Robinson remembers. "Walter Cronkite had the story, we had phoned him. It's finally at the end of this [ordeal], and Cronkite used it as the sign-off story for the end of the show. He said, 'And this proves that truth, justice, and the American way won out!' He had an animated graphic of Superman in the background with [a picture of] Jerry and Joe standing there. There wasn't a dry eye in the party, it was such a moving experience."

Courtesy of Jerry Robinson

Left to right: Joe Shuster, Neal Adams, Jerry Siegel, and Jerry Robinson shortly after Shuster's and Siegel's victory in their fight for residuals from DC Comics for their character, Superman.

Toward the end of their lives, Shuster and Siegel (who passed away in 1992 and 1996, respectively) were on good terms with DC. During this time, the Warner executive Steve Ross and the multimedia mogul Ted Turner went to bat on their behalf to make sure that DC upped their pensions. And Robinson is also quick to point out that the mistreatment of Siegel and Shuster is largely the fault of DC's founding regime in the 1930s, and that "if [DC's current publisher and his predecessor] Paul Levitz and Jenette Kahn had been in charge back then, this wouldn't have happened." Some griped that it was too little too late, but thanks to Robinson and Adams, this sad tale had an upbeat ending.

Siegel and Shuster were hardly the only creators in comics' Golden Age who were denied proper credit for their contributions, however. Perhaps the saddest story was that of Bill Finger, Batman's unbilled writer and co-creator. At least Siegel and Shuster received a byline on their most famous creation, even if it was removed for 30 years. And for a period in the early 1940s, Superman's creators were quite well-off financially. Bill Finger could make no such claims, and until his

death in 1974, Bob Kane refused to even admit that his creative partner had written any of the Batman stories, much less co-created the character. To many, Finger was at once the most admired—and the most overlooked—writer in comic books during the 1940s.

When Bob Kane left the Eisner & Iger Studio in 1939 to develop adventure features for DC, he realized he wasn't much of a writer. His strength, as indicated in comic books like *Wow, What a Magazine,* was humor features and gag cartoons. He needed someone to script the tales of derring-do he had promised to deliver to DC. That's where Bill Finger came in.

Finger was a voracious reader possessed of a quick wit and a gift for clever dialogue. His Jewish parents had wanted to send their son to medical school, but then the Depression came and Finger was working as a shoe salesman. Soon, he met Kane and the facile bookworm became Kane's go-to guy whenever he needed a silent writing partner. The two teamed up on DC features like 1939's "Clip Carson," an adventure strip clearly influenced by the work of the newspaper cartoonist Roy Crane (*Wash Tubbs*). When Kane had defected to DC from Eisner & Iger, he promised the ditor Vin Sullivan an adventure feature to replicate the runaway success of Superman. He needed to develop another costumed character, one that took itself as seriously as the Man of Steel, yet was different enough to stand out from the ever-expanding wave of Superman clones. Kane quickly generated sketches of a hero with a red union suit similar to Superman's and mechanical bird wings that recalled Leonardo da Vinci's "ornithopter" device. The character would be called "Bird Man." To Finger, something didn't seem right about this, and he suggested that since this character would be a detective, he should be named something more moody, like "the Bat-man," an homage to pulp magazine characters like The Bat. (Starting with Batman's third appearance, the hyphen was taken out of "Bat-man.") Kane realized that his silent partner was on to something.

Batman's first appearance in *Detective Comics* #27. Much of what made Batman distinctive—his pointy-eared cowl, his utility belt, his back story and personality—were developed by the writer Bill Finger. Art by Bob Kane.

Finger further proposed that the wings be turned into a more practical yet uniquely scalloped bat-like cape, and he suggested that Batman's tights be changed from red to gray. The writer then added a triangular motif to Batman's costume, including triangular "fins" protruding from his gloves and the addition of a cowl with pointed ears (Kane had wanted to go with a small black mask, like Zorro). This distinctive triangular motif is a memorable visual partially responsible for Batman's appeal; Finger was a whiz at coming up with such high-concept notions, and his other contributions to Batman included props such as the giant penny in the Batcave, as well as the idea that all of Batman's gadgets use the prefix "Bat" (e.g., Batmobile, Batcave, Batarang).

And Finger's contribution to the Batman mythos doesn't end with his renaming the character and streamlining his costume. He created Bruce Wayne's backstory (his parents were gunned down in front of him when he was a child) and was responsible for coming up with the character's personality. He also dreamed up many of the supporting characters and villains that are so central to the Batman universe: Commissioner Gordon, Catwoman, the Penguin, and Two-Face. Even the Caped Crusader's utility belt and the character's home base of Gotham City were Finger's contributions.

In formulating the basic concept of Batman, Kane and Finger drew inspiration from many sources. One was the 1930 film *The Bat Whispers,* in which a detective prowls the night as a killer wearing an ungainly bat mask. Finger's suggestion that Batman's eyes turn into white dots once he dons his mask was inspired by Lee Falk's 1936 newspaper strip hero The Phantom, whose black mask also revealed no visible eyeballs. (Nowadays, the "white dots" look is a staple of comic book
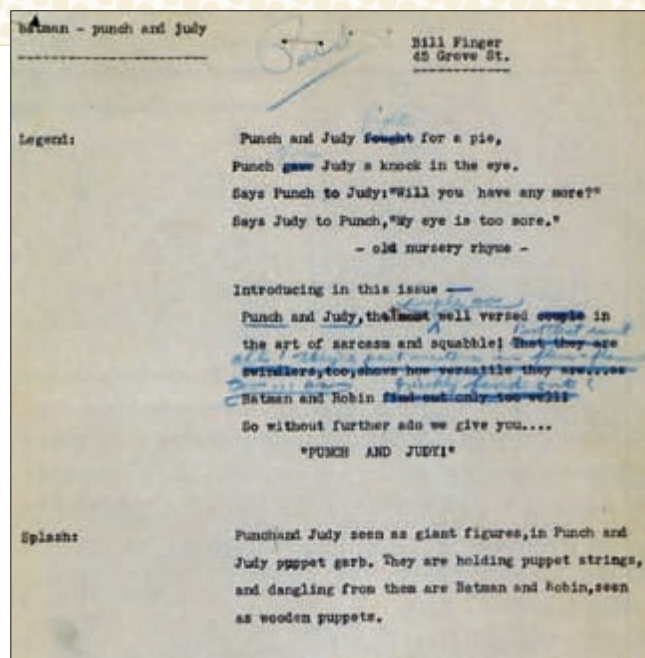
A sample script page by the legendary Batman writer, Bill Finger, the unheralded genius who co-created the character. The script is for Batman #31 (October-November 1945.)

BATMAN MAY HAVE BEEN THE FIRST DARK, BROODING ANTI-HERO SUPERHERO, BUT HE'S FAR FROM THE LAST. CHARACTERS SUCH AS LEN WEIN'S AND JOHN ROMITA'S X-MEN COMIC BOOK CHARACTER WOLVERINE AND JOSS WHEDON'S BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER TV CHARACTER ANGEL HAVE CERTAINLY TAKEN A PAGE FROM KANE'S AND FINGER'S ORIGINAL CONCEPTION OF THE DARK KNIGHT. IN FACT, IT MIGHT BE SAID THAT IF BATMAN IS A SUPERHERO RIFF ON DRACULA, THEN WOLVERINE IS A SUPERHERO RIFF ON THE WOLF MAN.

The cover of the December 15, 1937 issue of *The Shadow* comic book. As he hangs from a window shutter, The Shadow is striking a particularly "Batman-esque" pose.

characters from Green Lantern to Wolverine.) As mentioned, Kane was also inspired by the 1920 film *The Mark of Zorro* starring Douglas Fairbanks, most evident in the Dark Knight's swashbuckling theatrics. And like the Green Hornet of radio fame, Batman is a wealthy fop who moonlights as a masked crimefighter. There are numerous other literary and filmic sources that Kane and Finger drew from in creating Batman, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who was a super sleuth long before Batman was. Batman was also influenced by Bela Lugosi's romantic, moody portrayal of Bram Stoker's Dracula. And then there's Walter Gibson's pulp hero the Shadow, who liked to strike fear into the hearts of criminals, like a certain Dark Knight. In fact, this concept of a hero who is so scary that he even scares the criminals—but thank God he's on our side—is an idea first explored in comic books through Batman.

Finger was known among comic-book professionals as one of the better writers the medium had thus far produced. As a teenager, Al Jaffee had already heard tales of his famous relative, the comics writer Bill Finger. "He was my uncle Nat Finger's nephew," stated Jaffee. "When I was a teenager Bill Finger was already famous in the business writing Batman and Green Lantern [which he also co-created, with Martin Nodell]. When I was [around] 17 or so, they would say to me, 'Why can't you do famous cartoons like Bill Finger does?' They kept bringing his name up to me all the time as the big success in the cartoon field in our family. I had to live up to that." Finger was one of the only comic-book writers of this period to have developed a distinctive style. One could figure out which stories he wrote, whether you saw his byline or not, because of details like his signature giant

props, or his lurid narratives, which owed a lot to pulp magazines like *The Shadow.* "Bill Finger was the best writer in comic books," asserted Jerry Robinson. "He would attach things to the scripts to help out the artist—if the story was about a cruise ship, he would attach a schematic drawing of a cruise ship. It was immensely helpful! He did so much research!"

And yet, Finger was never recognized for his role in co-creating Batman. "Bob Kane had made a deal with DC that he [Kane] would write and draw Batman," Robinson explained. "So he kept Bill's involvement quiet." He also downplayed Finger's contributions to the character, claiming that he was Batman's sole creator. This of course makes no sense, since Finger had as much to do with creating Batman as Jerry Siegel did with developing Superman. For many years, Kane even denied that Finger *wrote* any of the Batman stories. Since Kane's DC contract said that he was to be Batman's sole writer and artist, he also kept quiet about his extensive use of uncredited assistants, or ghost artists, such as Robinson, Sheldon Moldoff, and Dick Sprang. Kane's contract—unusual for comic-book artists in that era—specified that in return for giving up ownership of Batman to DC, each Batman story would bear his signature, even if he didn't write or draw a single panel. "I think I signed Bob Kane's name more than he did," Robinson remarked. (This continued until the mid-1960s, at which time Batman got a major face-lift and ceased being drawn in the style of Bob Kane.) It's true that Kane was far from the only cartoonist to make use of uncredited ghost artists—so did Joe Shuster and Will Eisner. And newspaper cartoonists such as Al Capp (*Li'l Abner*) routinely utilized ghosts, a practice that continues to this day. But newspaper cartoonists have traditionally been rather forthright about their use of "assistants"—as were Shuster and Eisner. Not so with Bob Kane.

The Joker, Batman, and Robin as drawn by Jerry Robinson for DC Comics in 1978.

As with his treatment of Finger, Kane often downplayed his assistants' contributions to Batman in a manner that was both self-serving and excessive. For example, it has only recently come to light that Robinson was the creator of Batman's archnemesis, the Joker, the most famous villain in comic book history. Robinson helped to establish the look of the early Batman comics, having worked for Kane since late 1939, so it isn't surprising that it was he who developed this archetypal supervillain (who first appeared in *Batman* #1, in 1940). As Robinson described it, there had been villains in comics in those days like the early Batman foe Professor Hugo Strange, but the Joker was the first *super*villain. The Joker's bizarre, unexplained look—his bleached skin, grinning red lips, and seaweed-colored hair—make him one of the most visually distinctive figures to emerge from comics' Golden Age. However, in Kane's 1989 autobiography (co-written with Tom Andrae), *Batman and Me,* he denied that Robinson had anything to do with the Joker's creation. And yet by all accounts, Robinson created the first existing concept sketch of the Joker, a grotesquely leering playing-card jester with menacing red lips. Kane dismissed this sketch as merely a drawing of the Clown Prince's playing card; a close look at the drawing, however—and the testimony of Robinson himself—reveals that this drawing was clearly meant to be the Joker himself. And recent articles by the comics historians Gary Groth (in a 2005 issue of the *Comics Journal*) and Jim Amash (in a 2004 issue of the legendary comics writer Roy Thomas's magazine *Alter Ego*) support Robinson's claim that he did indeed create the Joker. "Bob stated for years that he based [the Joker] on the 1928 Conrad Veidt film *The Man Who Laughs,*" Robinson said. "But the true story is that I'd created the Joker based on an autobiographical incident. Everyone in my family

IN ADDITION TO HIS BATMAN WORK AS AN ARTIST, Bob Kane made personal appearances promoting the *Batman* TV show of the 1960s and was a consultant on the *Batman* movies of the 1980s and 1990s. He owned a piece of the licensing for *Batman* and leveraged TV development deals from his fame as Batman's creator. How did Kane wrangle such a unique contract when colleagues like Siegel and Shuster could not? No one knows all the particulars, and the details of the actual contract are shrouded in mystery. However, we do know this: In 1939, when Kane signed his first Batman contract with DC, his savvy father obtained legal advice that helped out his son, the result of which was that Kane walked away with a limited amount of creative control over the property. Then in 1946, Kane told DC's Jack Liebowitz that when he signed that first contract, he had been a minor, so the contract was null and void. Some said that Kane was born in 1915, others that he was born in 1916. He was in the same class at DeWitt Clinton High School as Will Eisner, who was born in 1917. But as Gerard Jones points out in his book *Men of Tomorrow,* "It was a common belief that the military drafted Jewish boys first … so a little money was slipped to a city clerk and a boy's birth certificate was made to disappear." Kane's father had made his birth certificate "disappear" early on, and so when he told Jack Liebowitz that he was in fact born in 1919, there was no way to contest his claim! Afraid that he had a potential lawsuit on his hands, Liebowitz returned partial ownership of Batman to Bob Kane; Kane also received other perks, including a percentage of subsidiary rights.
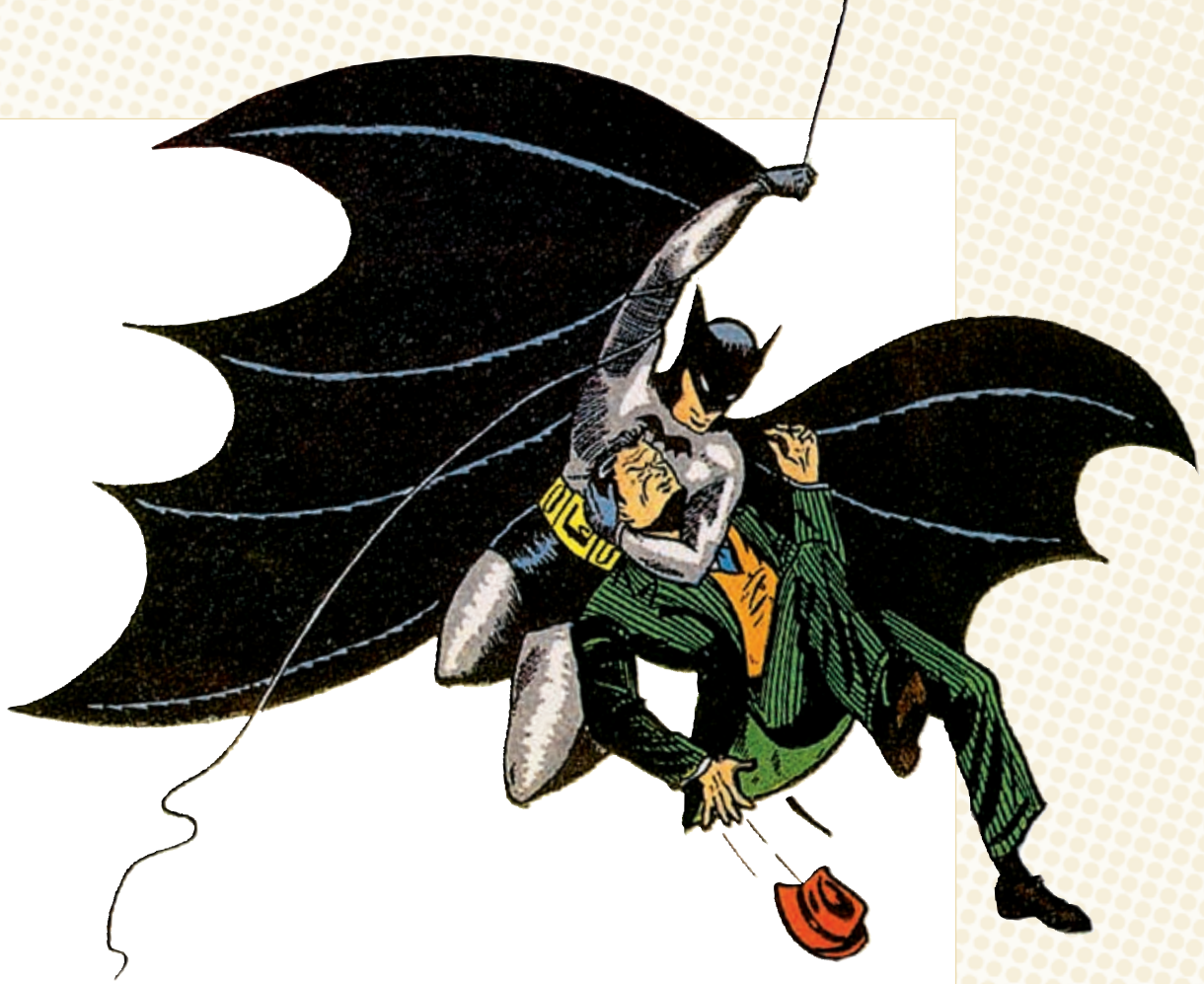
was a championship bridge player, and so we always had decks of cards lying around the house. At the time I had a creative writing assignment due at Columbia University, where I was studying when I wasn't working on Batman. I figured I'd write a story about a villain, but I liked humor, I liked comedy. So I thought, 'I'll combine the two, and make a murderer who looks like the Joker in a deck of cards. I brought it in and showed it to Bob and Bill. And the first design for the Joker that I drew looks just like the one in the deck of cards in my [childhood] bedroom." Robinson also noted that Kane's claim that he based the Joker on *The Man Who Laughs* is dubious, since an esoteric foreign film like *The Man Who Laughs* was more likely to have been seen by Bill Finger, not Bob Kane. According to Robinson, Bob Kane wouldn't have even been aware of the film back then, and he only mentioned it later in life to back up his claims that he created the Joker. Meanwhile, Finger was the resident film buff of the trio, and he was the one who was always attaching reference photos to scripts. So Finger—not Kane—was the person who used that film as a reference point when attaching a photo of Conrad Veidt to his first Joker script. Indeed, the Joker's ghoulish countenance is a dead ringer for Veidt in that film. The Joker merged the hobbies of two members of the Batman creative team—card playing and foreign films—and so it is most accurate to say that the Joker was created by Robinson and further developed

Batman ghost artist Jerry Robinson's initial concept sketch of the Joker, the most famous supervillain in comic book history.

One of Batman ghost artist Jerry Robinson's most famous Batman images appears on the cover of this 1943 *Detective Comics*. Robinson also co-created two of Batman's important supporting characters: Robin and the Joker.

by Finger. If Robinson gave the Joker his heart, Finger gave the memorable rogue his soul.

As is true with so many stories from the early days of comic books, not much thought was put into giving credit where credit was due, and so the stories of unsung heroes and unheralded creators are legion. But thanks to the efforts of cartoonists like Jerry Robinson, who used his clout to help procure credit and/or financial compensation for fellow comics pros like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and Bill Finger, history has acknowledged the contributions made by these artists who were so underappreciated during their own careers.

WHEN BILL FINGER DIED IN 1974, HE DIED A PAUPER, NEVER FINANCIALLY COMPENSATED FOR THE ENORMOUS CONTRIBUTIONS HE'D MADE TO THE CAPED CRUSADER. EVER SINCE THEN, COMICS INDUSTRY PROS LIKE JERRY ROBINSON HAVE WORKED TIRELESSLY TO AT LEAST MAKE SURE THAT FINGER GOT RECOGNITION FOR HIS WORK, BELATED AS IT IS. IN 2005, AS A TRIBUTE TO HIS OLD FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE, ROBINSON PETITIONED FOR THE CREATION OF THE BILL FINGER AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN COMICS WRITING. THE FIRST BILL FINGER AWARDS WERE GIVEN AT THE 2005 SAN DIEGO COMICON, ONE OF THE NATION'S LARGEST AND MOST PRESTIGIOUS COMIC-BOOK CONVENTIONS. FITTINGLY, THE FIRST BILL FINGER AWARD WAS GIVEN TO JERRY SIEGEL.

Jerry Robinson
in 1940 in his
N.Y. Times
Building studio.

Batman co-creator Bill
Finger was denied a
writing credit on his
scripts, so he made his
presence known via his
most famous gimmick,
the use of giant props.
On this 1942 DC comic
book cover, Batman,
Robin, and the Joker
are surrounded by a
giant deck of cards. Art
by Fred Ray.

WHY WE FIGHT

A World War II propaganda poster, circa 1942, painted by Jerry Robinson's friend and colleague, the Jewish cartoonist Mort Meskin.

From 1938 to 1941,

comic books were certainly a growth industry, a fledgling branch of the American media with a significant hold on the nation's youth. It was only after America entered World War II, however, that sales skyrocketed. With the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor and Hitler massacring Jews overseas, it suddenly became impossible for American comic-book publishers to ignore putting wartime themes into their work. Comic books became practically regulation army equipment, as millions of American boys shipped out with a stack of four-color propaganda pamphlets featuring various superheroes putting the smackdown on Axis forces. "As comics writers," Stan Lee said, "we had to have villains in our stories. And once World War II started, the Nazis gave us the greatest villains in the world to fight against. It was a slam dunk." As comics rode the tide of wartime patriotism, their influence on the American imagination became as indelible as a permanent marker. No mere fad, comic books were officially here to stay. Ironically, Jewish comic-book creators who had obeyed the unwritten rule forbidding them from writing overtly Jewish themes into their work were suddenly encouraged to depict their alpha-male superheroes sweeping the floor with Nazi spies and saboteurs. It would be hard to find a more potent metaphor for Jewish empowerment. "I think that certainly during World War II, the comics that were being done reflected both an American—and particularly a Jewish—attitude with Nazis," noted the cartoonist Peter Kuper (*World War Three Illustrated, The New Yorker, MAD Magazine*). "Their creating characters that could beat the Nazis made perfect sense for somebody who felt a direct threat from them. And the irony of Superman being kind of like the Nietzschean ideal! The Nazis were thinking of themselves that way, but I don't know the extent that Siegel and Shuster were consciously co-opting that idea and then turning it on its head. However, I think that again, it's a natural means of empowerment. But it also comes from the fact that

Jews can't claim an oral tradition solely their own, but [storytelling became] certainly a part of Jewish tradition. And the comics were sort of coming through with pictures and a tradition of storytelling. Things like the Golem and a lot of that kind of lore, I think it's engrained in the Jewish culture. Also, it comes from mythology in general, because superheroes were coming out of Greek mythology and Norse mythology. But again, it's the attraction to that storytelling tradition that figures into Judaism."

Superman gave such a pounding to Nazi agents from 1941 to 1945 that according to legend, the Nazi minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, jumped up in the midst of a Reichstag meeting holding up a Superman comic book and denouncing the Man of Steel as a Jew. Meanwhile over at Timely Comics, Joe Simon's and Jack Kirby's 1941 creation Captain America took on the Nazi agent Red Skull. Captain America, alias Steve Rogers, could be seen as a symbol for the way Jews were stereotypically depicted as frail and passive. "Two Jews created this weak little guy named Steve Rogers who gets shot in the arm and, by way of a 'secret serum,' becomes this super-strong hero who starts destroying Nazis," said Kuper. "What a distinctly empowering image!" One would be hard pressed to find a comic-book character who didn't join in the war effort, from Captain Marvel, who fought the aptly named Captain Nazi, to the Spy Smasher, whose name described his occupation, to the Young Allies, who tussled with Nazis the way average youngsters tussled with schoolyard bullies. Patriotic heroes like Minute Man and Uncle Sam, who more or less wore the American flag as their costume, had their day in the sun during this era, equating the superhero's moral code with solid American ideals.

Wishing to prove to the gentile public that they were good Americans, Jewish comics creators were careful to fash-ion superheroes who were super-American—in other words, charac-ters who would not be perceived as either Jewish or belonging to any specific ethnicity. "When you're
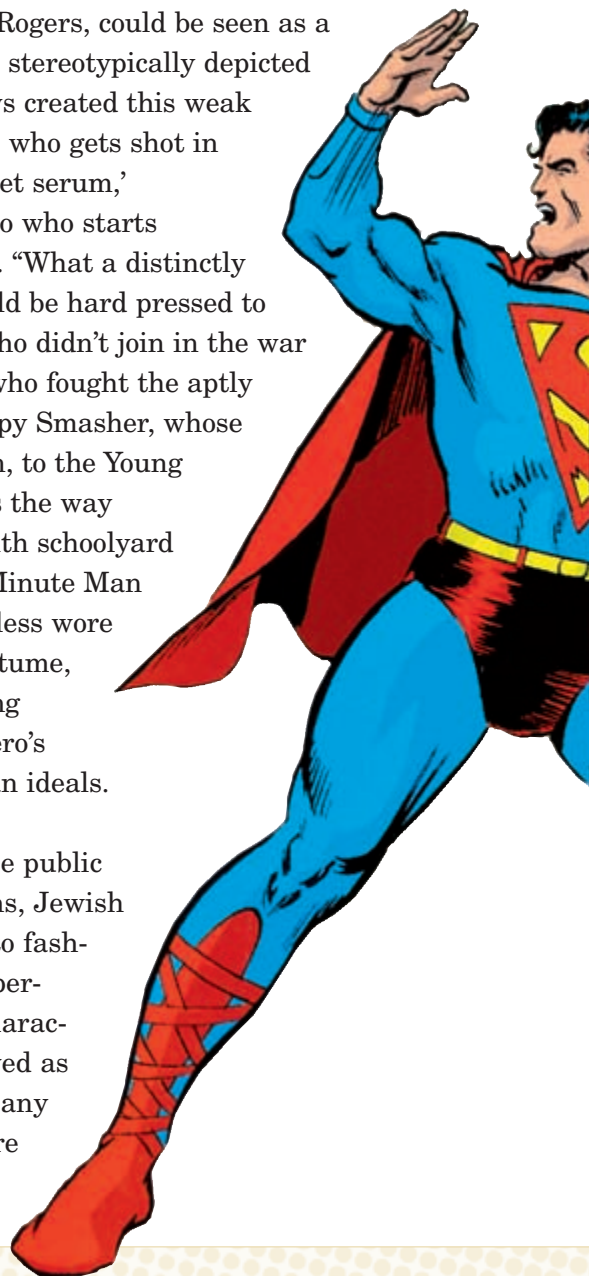
sitting down to write about an American hero within an American culture, you begin to devise those characters or characteristics that you regard as gentile," Eisner explained, referring to the blond, blue-eyed Steve Rogers and his ilk. (However, it must be noted that Professor Reinstein, the scientist who created the secret serum that gives Steve Rogers his powers, was an obvious nod to the Jewish physicist Albert Einstein.) Simon and Kirby also created the Boy Commandos, a comic-book feature in which an international group of patriotic children from Allied countries like America, France, and England aided in the war effort. The stories' final panels often depicted Hitler being foiled by the children. The lesson: even the smallest child could play a role in the battle against evil.

Superman busting up a Nazi cannon—World War II propaganda at its harmless best. Art by the classic Superman artist Fred Ray.

Max Gaines, who in the early 1940s was the chief of the All-American Group, could see that comic books were having an influential effect on the nation's youth. To stave off potential parental concerns he wisely invited a number of prominent educators, psychologists, and clergymen to serve on his board of advisors. To ensure that the AA titles were respectable, Gaines and Sheldon Mayer issued these strict guidelines to their creative staff:

- *NEVER* SHOW ANYONE BEING STABBED OR SHOT
- *NEVER* SHOW A SCENE OF TORTURE
- *NEVER* SHOW A HYPODERMIC NEEDLE
- *NEVER* SHOW A COFFIN, ESPECIALLY WITH ANYONE IN IT

Within the All-American Group, Gaines started up the Educational Comics (or EC for short) imprint. EC published such wholesome fare as *Picture Stories from the Bible, Picture Stories from World History,* and *Picture Stories from Science,* as well as *Tiny Tot Comics* and *Animal Fables.* Although Gaines enlisted a group of rabbis and priests to consult on the *Picture Stories* titles, the cost-conscious publisher often rejected their scholarly advice in favor of creating shorter, more economically feasible comic book features. "I don't give a damn how long it took Moses," he is said to have screamed, "I want it in two panels!"

One member of the AA Group's advisory board, the psychologist William Moulton Marston, was one of the few intellectual advocates

of the educational potential of comics. To this end, in 1941 Marston created a comicibook character for Gaines whom he believed would set a positive example for America's children. His creation, Wonder Woman, debuted in All-American's *All-Star Comics* #8, cover-dated December 1941-January 1942, and was originally drawn by the veteran cartoonist Harry G. Peter. Endowed with godlike strength and raised on Paradise Island, a land populated only by Amazon warriors, Wonder Woman was a crime-fighting Amazon and the first major female superhero. Like Captain America and his patriotic ilk, Wonder Woman was a living, breathing American flag, with an American eagle adorning her bathing suit-style top, and star-spangled hot pants rounding out her costume. But unlike Captain America (or Batman or Superman for that matter), Wonder Woman often avoided the use of fisticuffs when she could simply tie up her foes with a "magic lasso." The magic lasso would compel those held within its grasp to tell the truth. The fact that Marston, the creator of the magic lasso, is also credited with the development of the polygraph machine (aka the lie detector) is probably no coincidence. And because his Amazing Amazon eschewed violence in favor of truth-telling and was a proto-feminist icon that girls could look to as a positive role model she was well ahead of her time in terms of strong female comic-book characters. Inspired by Wonder Woman's success, other female superheroes like Liberty Bell, Phantom Lady, and Black Canary would soon be unleashed on the comics-reading public.

As Marston told the *Family Circle* on October 25, 1940, there were then about 108 comics titles on newsstands, and sales figures hovered between 10 and 12 million copies sold per month, totaling between 40 and 50 million young readers a month. Marston was quick to add that 86 percent of parents also enjoyed reading comic books (although it must be noted that few would likely admit as much in public). By 1943, the comic-book industry had become a multimillion-dollar business with distribution reaching a new high of

> *WONDER WOMAN* wasn't the first female superhero, but after her debut in 1941 she became the first major female superhero. Eisner's and Iger's 1938 jungle warrior Sheena predates the Amazing Amazon by three years, though **Sheena** couldn't really be classified as a superhero. Meanwhile, Sheldon Mayer's zaftig **Red Tornado**—who debuted in November 1940's *All-American Comics* #20—was indisputably a superhero, but she was far too obscure to take hold in the public's imagination. (This Red Tornado shouldn't be confused with the well-known male Red Tornado who debuted later.) Other pre-Wonder Woman female superheroes include **Fantomah,** who made her debut in Fiction House's *Jungle Comics* #2 (February 1940) in a story by the writer/artist Fletcher Hanks, and **The Woman in Red,** created by the writer Richard E. Hughes and the artist George Mandel in *Thrilling Comics* #2 (published by Standard Comics) in March 1940.

In this three-part story arc, the artist/writer Jon Bogdanove and writer Louise Simonson answered the decades-long question: What if Superman had been present in Nazi Europe? Would he have been able to make a difference and help the people who so urgently needed a savior?

25 million copies a month. At the time they merged in 1945, the All-American and DC groups combined comprised approximately one-third of total comic-book sales. Companies like Quality and Timely were doing consistently solid business as well. The comic-book industry was at an all-time high. And even though there was a slight dip in sales after World War II, throughout the late 1940s comic books were still a safe bet for any magazine publisher looking to expand and get into the children's market. Sure, comics may have been considered cheap and disposable, but they were also innocent clean fun, as American as apple pie, baseball, or jazz. They may have been a lowly institution, but they were an institution nonetheless.

All was going great. And then the other shoe dropped …
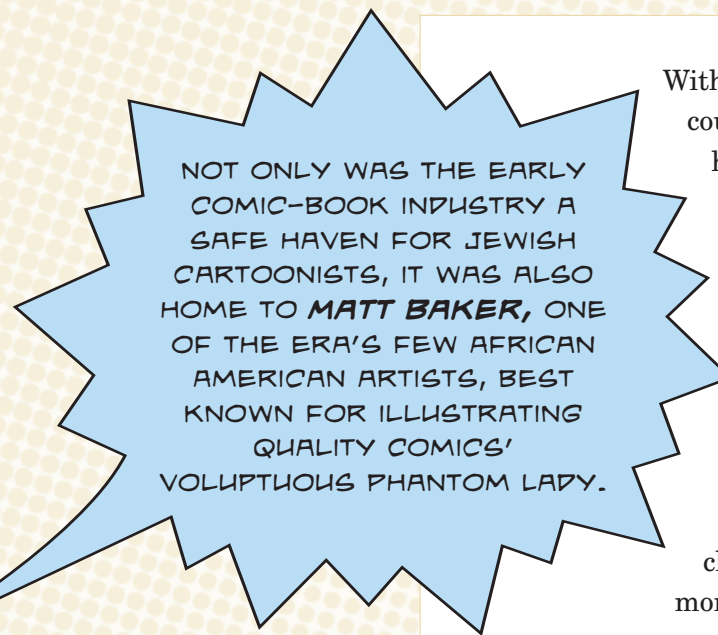
Comic books reigned supreme among the new mass-market media of the 1940s. For sheer entertainment value, they had almost every other media outlet beat. Unlike radio, comic books could actually show the action being described by the narrator. Unlike theater, comic books could take you to other worlds, other dimensions. Unlike movies, comic books were always in vibrant, living color, and budgetary restrictions weren't an issue given that the special effects department consisted of a penciler, an inker, and a colorist who were limited only by their imaginations. If a script called for a seven-tentacled slime monster, that's what you got. In fact, until realistic sci-fi films like *Star Wars* took root in the late 1970s, comic books were the only place you could see a convincingly real action set-piece. And during the 1940s, television was still in its infancy, still in grainy black and white, and still limited in scope as compared to the fantastic images on display at your nearby comics rack. Comics were at the top of their game, and this inevitably meant that some were threatened by their success.

It turns out that Max Gaines was right to create a board of advisors when he ran the AA Group; parent groups were increasingly fearful that the subject matter their children were exposed to in "comic magazines" might not be in their best interest. Confronted with the growing popularity of comic books, by 1945 the General Federation of Women's Clubs and other organizations concerned with preserving the innocence of America's youth began a campaign against so-called true-crime comics. True-crime comics were a relatively new genre spawned by the writer/artist Charlie Biro's successful title *Crime Does Not Pay,* which inspired many imitators. These true-crime comic books were known for their lurid tales of murder and mayhem, and the features within each comic had equally lurid titles, such as "Murder, Morphine and Me" and "Boston's Bloody Gang War." Parents and educators didn't like these comics, nor did they approve of the "good girl art" featuring scantily clad females drawn in seductive pin-up poses, a style of illustration favored by Fiction House but also by other publishers like Fox Features.

Stories about grave robbers were just one of the subjects EC comics frequently explored, much to the horror of parents and educators.

NOT ONLY WAS THE EARLY COMIC-BOOK INDUSTRY A SAFE HAVEN FOR JEWISH CARTOONISTS, IT WAS ALSO HOME TO **MATT BAKER,** ONE OF THE ERA'S FEW AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS, BEST KNOWN FOR ILLUSTRATING QUALITY COMICS' VOLUPTUOUS PHANTOM LADY.

With such lurid material on comics newsstands, Gaines could see the writing on the wall. So after he sold out his one-third stake in the AA Group to his partners Liebowitz and Donenfeld (making half a million dollars in the process), Gaines started a new company devoted only to wholesome material. He was able to take his Educational Comics imprint with him when he left AA, including his *Picture Stories* titles. Working on his own for the next two years, Gaines put all his effort into his EC stable, but the company consistently lost money. His comics may have been morally sound, but children preferred the tales of superheroes fighting monstrous villains. Then on August 20, 1947, Gaines was on a boating trip on Lake Placid, New York, with his friend Sam Irwin and Irwin's son. Without warning, they were hit by another boat. In a heroic act, Gaines saved the life of Irwin's son by throwing the child into the back of the boat just seconds before the collision. Gaines absorbed the brunt of the impact and died instantly.

Max's son Bill, who was born in Brooklyn in 1922, took charge of EC at the urging of his mother, Jessie, following Max's death. He had a complex relationship with his father, who often thought the child would never amount to anything, in part because Bill had a love of mystery novels and practical jokes and a marked lack of interest in his studies. He flirted with the idea of becoming a chemist but flunked out of the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in his third year. After serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II, he married his second cousin, Hazel Grieb, and studied at New York University with the goal of becoming a teacher. Earning straight As, he seemed to have finally found his niche. It was then that Max Gaines died.

Although known as the "father of the American comic book" and a savvy businessman, Max had never been able to successfully peddle his saccharine-sweet comics titles, and he was $10,000 in debt at the time of his demise, having run through the profit from selling his share in AA. Bill Gaines certainly seemed like the least likely person to get his father's company out of the red, given that he had consistently disappointed his old man and demonstrated zero business acumen. Moreover, he was still attending NYU when he took over EC, and the combined workload was staggering. But Bill did inherit something from his father: a keen instinct for salesman- ship and an unerring eye for talent. Besides, Max's business manager, Frank Lee, and his circulation manager (and editor), Sol

Cohen, handled much of the daily grind, so this helped ease Bill's transition into the publishing world. Not that there weren't a few false starts before Bill settled into his new job.

To get the company in the black, in early 1948 Gaines first planned a line of *Archie*-style teenage comics, which were then the rage. His first inspired decision as EC's publisher was to hire 23-year-old Al Feldstein to draw them. Feldstein, born in 1925 to a Russian Jewish family, had served as an aviation cadet in the Air Force during World War II after his stint at Eisner & Iger. By the time he landed on EC's doorstep, he was a seasoned freelancer who could tackle any project thrown at him, and he displayed a marked talent for delineating wholesome yet voluptuous young women. This made him perfect for teen comic books. But then the bottom fell out of the teen comics craze. But Gaines, knowing talent when he saw it, kept Feldstein around, putting him to work on EC's western and romance titles. Feldstein, who was never shy about voicing his opinions, told Gaines he was interested in writing as well as drawing comics. Together Gaines and Feldstein started editing such romance and western comics titles as *Moon Girl* and *Saddle Justice.* And as Gaines told Maria Reidelbach, the author of the book *Completely Mad*, he decided to play a "flagrant trick to fool the post office." Because a new second-class permit was required for new titles, Gaines saved time and money by altering the titles of his books (but never the content), morphing the aforementioned titles into the awkward-sounding *A Moon, A Girl … Romance* and *Saddle Romances.* Gaines and Feldstein even wrote advice columns in the romance titles, under the pseudonyms Adrian, Amy, and Chuck. After he graduated from NYU, Gaines spent more time at EC, and he realized he was having fun assigning artists to titles that best represented their talent. An early hire was Johnny Craig, who had worked for Max Gaines at the AA Group when he was but a teenager. Now at EC, Craig joined Gaines and Feldstein in editing the six western, crime, and horror comics they were overseeing.

Gaines also spent more time with Feldstein, and he learned that his employee shared his passion for old radio horror programs, such as Arch Oboler's *Lights Out.* As an experiment, the duo wrote two one-shot horror stories titled "Crypt of Terror" and "Vault of Horror" and added them into two of their crime comics, *Crime Patrol* and *War*

One of the artist/ writer/editor Al Feldstein's singularly gruesome *Tales from the Crypt* covers.

Against Crime. As in the radio shows they admired, these two horror tales were presided over by narrators—the Crypt-Keeper and the Vault-Keeper, respectively—who ushered the reader into the world of the story. Gaines had finally found his forte: scaring the hell out of people. Normally, these two back-up horror stories would exist solely to gauge reader response. If the fans liked them, Gaines would publish more horror stories. Impulsively, he and Feldstein didn't even wait for reader feedback on these two "test" stories, and instead started writing more horror tales. Sol Cohen, thinking that this was a hugely irresponsible and rash decision, left EC and joined the now-forgotten Avon Comics.

The EC horror line of titles often took old myths and monsters— like werewolves—and made them fresh and relevant again.

Gaines and Feldstein didn't skip a beat. They immediately took over Cohen's duties, editing the entire EC line (with Johnny Craig's help). In early 1950, they killed the crime titles in favor of the horror books *The Crypt of Terror* (later renamed *Tales from the Crypt*) and *The Vault of Horror.* These titles were important for several reasons: they were two of the earliest comic-book titles solely devoted to horror; they invited fan interaction with regular letter columns that were humorously written, where fan letters were answered "in character" by the Crypt-Keeper and the Vault-Keeper themselves; and they were the first EC comics published after Gaines changed the name of the company from Educational Comics to Entertaining Comics. A motto was adopted for EC: "A New Trend in Comic Books." Here, Gaines was clearly calling out the other publishers, daring their books to be as innovative and edgy as his product. The notoriously grisly horror tales featured in these two books boasted titles such as "Coffin Spell," "Ooze in the Cellar," and "'Taint the Meat, It's the Humanity." Disembodied limbs and bloody hatchets were familiar sights in these books, though the stories were often leavened with heaping helpings of levity. In "Midnight Mess," from *Tales from the Crypt* #35, a hapless man stumbles upon a vampire restaurant, which serves "blood-juice-cocktail, … hot blood-consomme … roast blood-clots … french-fried scabs …blood sherbet …" The story ends with a morbidly brilliant sight gag, as our hero finds himself with a spigot attached to his neck, and the vampires fill their glasses with his blood. One can see shades of things to come, as the gallows humor

evident in these horror books would take center stage in later EC offerings like *MAD*. The next two "New Trend" books from EC were science-fiction titles, *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy*. Like the horror titles, these were often morality tales, where the didactic bluntness of the stories was made more palatable by the grittily rendered drawings of vampires and aliens. In fact, EC titles soon became known as some of the best-illustrated stories in the business. And if the stories were often on the preachy side, they were also better constructed and more powerfully written than the fare offered by most other comics publishers. These titles were followed by *Shock SuspenStories* and *Crime SuspenStories* (which focused on soapy stories of twisted love triangles and crimes of passion), and a third horror title, *The Haunt of Fear* (whose narrator was "The Old Witch").

Another frequent interest in the EC comics stories were zombies, vampires, and other undead creatures. Art by Graham "Ghastly" Ingles.

Aside from their uniformly superior artwork, another element that set EC comics apart from those of other 1950s-era publishers was their socially conscious attitude. Gaines's and Feldstein's books took the bold chance of addressing controversial topics often swept under the rug by most comic-book publishers, such as abusive relationships, misguided patriotism, racism, and anti-Semitism. In the story "Hate!" from *Shock SuspenStories* #5 (October-November 1952), written by Al Feldstein and illustrated by Wally Wood, the ultra-WASPy John Smith works with his anti-Semite friends to drive his new Jewish neighbors out of town. He zealously participates in hate crimes until his mother, disappointed in his behavior, reveals to John that he was adopted, and his real parents were Jewish. Once John's friends find out, they turn on him and beat him to a bloody pulp, yelling, "Maybe you'll get the idea, Jew!" This is the final image we see as the story ends. Hearing the word "Jewish" in a comic book in those days was incredibly rare, and it would be naive to assume that this story of anti-Semitism wasn't inspired by Feldstein's Jewish background. This morality tale was typical of EC's fare, as was "Judgment Day," from *Weird Fantasy* #18, published in March-April 1953, also written by Feldstein and illustrated by Joe Orlando. In the story, an Earth astronaut named Tarlton is sent to the planet Cybrinia to judge whether its robot inhabitants are socially and technologically advanced enough to join the Earth's Galactic Republic. Determining that Cybrinia is a segregated society (the orange robots consign the blue robots to economic discrimination and ghettos), Tarlton decides that Cybrinia cannot be part of the republic until its people, like those on Earth, have learned to live together without discrimination. When Tarlton returns to his spaceship, he removes his helmet, and we see that he is a black man, "the beads of

Two pages from *Shock SuspenStories* #5, October-November 1952. The story "Hate" was one of the rare comic-book stories of the era to address anti-Semitism.

AND INSIDE THE SHIP, THE MAN REMOVED HIS SPACE HELMET AND SHOOK HIS HEAD, AND THE INSTRUMENT LIGHTS MADE THE BEADS OF PERSPIRATION ON HIS DARK SKIN TWINKLE LIKE DISTANT STARS...

THE END 7

EC depicted minorities with dignity, and in this way, they were more the exception than the rule.

perspiration on his dark skin twinkling like distant stars …" It's important to note that Tarlton is depicted as a dignified, handsome black man, in a time when most comic-book depictions of African Americans were offensive and mocking. Gaines and Feldstein were clearly aware of the fact that since many children read their comics, they had a moral responsibility to provide images of minorities that weren't degrading or cruel. The O. Henry-style twist that ends "Judgment Day" was typical of EC's horror and sci-fi stories, and it presaged the morality tales of later genre TV shows like *The Twilight Zone, Alfred Hitchcock Presents,* and *Star Trek*. And in the ensuing decades, major Hollywood filmmakers like Steven Spielberg (*War of the Worlds*), Robert Zemeckis (*Back to the Future*), and George Lucas (*Star Wars*) have commented at length about how deeply the EC horror and science-fiction comics influenced them. As Spielberg noted in his foreword to the Gemstone Publishing reprint collection *Shock SuspenStories Volume 1,* "While most of the comic books were devoted to costumed superheroes, Archie, and Donald Duck, Bill Gaines was using the medium to educate his audience, like his father before him." In truth, EC burned its imprimatur on an entire generation of young, unformed brain stems. Gaines and Feldstein had obviously struck a nerve with their purple prose, and the audience immediately started to take notice.

FILMMAKERS LIKE *SPIELBERG* AND *LUCAS* WEREN'T THE ONLY ONES WHOSE BRAINS WERE FRIED BY THE EC HORROR AND SCI-FI LINE. OTHER CELEBS WHO WERE NOTED EC FANATICS GROWING UP INCLUDE THE GRATEFUL DEAD FRONTMAN *JERRY GARCIA,* THE COMEDIAN *GEORGE CARLIN,* AND THE ACTOR *JACK NICHOLSON.*

The old EC titles, such as those in the *Picture Stories* line, were continually phased out to make room for these new, more lurid comics, and EC finally began making money. Letters poured in and reader reaction was ecstatic. The letter columns—more personable than those in other comics—were appreciated by fans, who also took to the "star system" created by Gaines and Feldstein. EC's stellar stable of artists were promoted alongside the stories themselves; names such as Al Feldstein, Johnny Craig, Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Al Williamson, Jack Kamen, Bernard Krigstein, Reed Crandall, George Evans, and Graham "Ghastly" Ingles became nearly as well known as the Crypt-Keeper.

Another addition to EC's talented roster was Harvey Kurtzman. Like Feldstein, Kurtzman (1924–93) came from a Russian Jewish family. His progressive parents subscribed to the *Daily Worker* and sent Kurtzman to Camp Kinderland, a left-wing summer camp. At Manhattan's High School of Music and Art, Kurtzman met many of his lifelong friends and colleagues, including Al Jaffee, Will Elder (his frequent collaborator), Harry Chester, and John Severin. Kurtzman had originally come to EC in 1949, mistakenly believing that the company's initials still stood for "Educational Comics," and having ideas for just those types of stories. Gaines and Feldstein were blown away by Kurtzman's one-page "Hey, Look" humor strips, but since they were now publishing mostly horror and sci-fi, EC didn't have anywhere to place his humor work. (The "Hey, Look" strips had been previously published by Stan Lee at Timely, which was also where Kurtzman met his future wife, Adele Hasan.) However, Gaines felt Kurtzman's raw talent was too rare to waste, so he set up the young genius with his uncle, David Gaines, who actually was producing educational comics. Kurtzman's first story for the Gaines clan was *Lucky Fights It Through,* a Western about—of all things—syphilis, which included a singalong titled "That Ignorant, Ignorant Cowboy."

Courtesy of www.deniskitchen.com

Self-portrait of *MAD Magazine*'s original editor, Harvey Kurtzman.

By the end of 1950, after doing some freelancing for EC's horror and science-fiction titles, Kurtzman created two EC war titles, *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat.* Like those of Gaines and Feldstein, Kurtzman's stories belied a strong social conscience, and he refused to portray minorities as racist caricatures. In his Korean War tales, he sometimes told the story from the point of view of an enemy combatant, something that had rarely been done before in a comic book. Kurtzman's war books still hold up, having influenced future generations of politically minded cartoonists, like Peter Kuper. "Those are some of the finest comics that have ever been made," Kuper enthused. "And they brought realism into comics. So many facets! They had a big influence on me, Harvey Kurtzman's work in general and the war comics [in particular]."

By 1951, EC had officially been pulled out of the financial hole in which Max Gaines had left it. It wasn't as big as the industry leader DC, but it was profitable. Feldstein was editing the seven horror, sci-fi, and suspense books, and Kurtzman was carefully editing his two war books. Some might say that he was editing them a little *too* carefully; he often spent long hours meticulously researching tanks and aircraft so that he

(and his artistic collaborators) might depict them accurately in his books. Because of this, he was slower than Feldstein. Since Kurtzman didn't work on as many titles as his colleague, he was only making a fraction of the money Feldstein was bringing in, and this started eating away at him. Kurtzman came to Gaines with his problem, and Gaines was faced with a serious dilemma. Although Kurtzman was working like a dog on his two titles, they were only two titles, and so if he gave Kurtzman a raise, Feldstein would be infuriated. Kurtzman didn't want to work on the horror titles, which he found increasingly offensive. What could Gaines do to placate both men? Suddenly, he had a brainstorm: he remembered Kurtzman's "Hey, Look!" strips and suggested that his iconoclastic artist create a humor comic. Kurtzman was intrigued and began to study college humor magazines, with their in-jokes and sophomoric satire. He came up with a humor comic book unlike any seen before. It would be a comic book that made fun of other comic books. It would be called *MAD,* and it would revolutionize American comedy.

MAD #1 debuted in late summer 1952. Harvey Kurtzman was the editor of the first 28 issues, for which he also wrote the lion's share of the scripts (and occasionally illustrated the covers). Kurtzman was also known for drawing out rough sketches on tracing paper overlays, basically sketching out a mock-up of the artwork for his cartoonists to follow. Ever the comics auteur (some might say taskmaster), Kurtzman would often insist that his artists adhere to every sight gag and nuance he had indicated in his sketches. But regardless of what one thought of Kurtzman's overzealous attitude, it was plain to all that the man had a definite vision for this new comic book.

MAD #1, October 1952. It may sound ludicrous, but without this unassuming humor publication, we wouldn't have *National Lampoon*, "Saturday Night Live," *The Onion,* "*The Daily Show*," or "The Simpsons."

All four stories found within the pages of *MAD* #1 spoofed a different EC comic. The crime comics like *Shock SuspenStories,* for example, were parodied in the story "Ganefs!," Yiddish for "thieves." The first few issues were illustrated wholly by Kurtzman's EC colleagues Will Elder, Jack Davis, Wally Wood, and John Severin. Kurtzman's

writing style was edgier and more adult than the ordinary humor comic; whereas normal humor titles didn't dare go for belly laughs, preferring to stick with lightweight, Archie-style humor, *MAD* billed itself as "Humor in a Jugular Vein" (its early subtitle), and it did indeed go for the jugular. It often did so by spoofing what was ridiculous about other comic books. In *MAD* #12's spoof of Archie, titled "Starchie," it depicted the clean-cut kids as real teenagers. In Kurtzman's and Elder's story, Starchie is a juvenile delinquent who smokes like a chimney and comes from a white-trash family where his parents routinely beat each other. The disgustingly pervy middle-aged principal, Mr. Weathernot (a parody of Archie's Mr. Weatherbee), can't stop guzzling booze, nor can he stop chasing the teenage girls in the strip because "they're drawn so gosh darned cute!" Eventually Starchie's pal Bottleneck (a spoof of Jughead) rats him out to the cops; once in jail, Starchie bangs his head against the wall thinking of how the gorgeous blonde Biddy (a parody of Betty) threw herself at him and he never did a thing about it. Sexual repression had never been more fully realized in a comic book before, and the teens in this comic were more realistically portrayed than anywhere in 1950s pop culture outside of the film *Rebel Without a Cause.* What *MAD* did so well was point out the falsehoods that lay beneath the phony veneer supported by most pop culture. At first *MAD* only attacked other comic books, but then Kurtzman expanded his range to include movies (like *King Kong,* lampooned as "Ping Pong"), TV shows (like *Howdy Doody,* spoofed as "Howdy Dooit"), poetry (like Poe's "The Raven," which was juxtaposed with hilariously anarchic imagery), and advertising (Bufferin ads, here known as "Bofforin").

Designed to appeal to both kids and adults, *MAD* was the first satirical comic book to address the nation's social ills and challenge its sacred cows. Kurtzman even took on the Army-McCarthy hearings in *MAD* #17's *What's My Shine!* (illustrated by Jack Davis), where Senator Joseph McCarthy's Senate subcommittee hearings charging that Communists had infiltrated the Army were turned into a game show, thus revealing the kangaroo court foolishness of McCarthy's crusade. (And the title "What's My Shine" was not only a reference to the game show "What's My Line," but also to McCarthy's consultant, David Schine.) But did *MAD*'s tackling of social issues like the McCarthy hearings have anything to do with Kurtzman being Jewish? "Yeah, I think that for Jews of my generation especially, social consciousness came naturally for those of us who suffered from a lack of civil rights and were discriminated against," said Al Jaffee. "Social consciousness really is in a way self-serving. Because by being in favor of civil rights, for example, in a like way you're really saying,

'Jews have suffered without civil rights for so many centuries that we know what not having civil rights is, so we cannot possibly impose this on someone else, not to have civil rights.' I think it's a gut reaction; I don't think either Harvey Kurtzman or I or anybody who works in the entertainment business—comedians, writers—sit down and say, 'I owe something to society.' Basically, we're trying to be funny, and a good source of humor is the stupidities in society, and certainly bigotry is one of the biggest stupidities. And Jews have experienced it firsthand and they know how stupid it is, so we go after it."

And *MAD* also gave a wink to its Jewish readers with the constant use of Yiddishisms, such as "fershlugginer," "schmaltz," "oy," and "feh." Some of the Jewish references are even more blatant; in Kurtzman's and the artist Jack Davis's story "Murder the Husband!" (*MAD* #11), one of the word balloons is in Hebrew. "*MAD* made fun of pretentiousness; they made fun of the nobleman," observed Jaffee. "Because none of them were noblemen. It's basic irreverence." Kurtzman's early *MAD* comics smashed taboos (you weren't supposed to mock the McCarthy hearings in the pages of a lowly comic book), pointing out the fallacies inherent in all aspects of society. In doing so, Kurtzman influenced such future artistic luminaries as the *Maus* creator Art Spiegelman, the filmmaker/Monty Python member Terry Gilliam, and underground comics legend Robert Crumb, and *The Simpsons* creator Matt Groening. Although Gaines was initially skeptical of *MAD*'s success and was willing to keep the title going because he believed in it, *MAD* actually did prove to be a hit, selling well alongside EC's horror and sci-fi titles.

Yet Gaines's successful turnaround of his father's failing company led to scores of imitators producing horror, crime, and science-fiction comics—many of them with no redeeming qualities—and alarmed parents around the nation objected to the "filth" their kids were reading. This anti-comic-book sentiment led in the spring of 1954 to the publication of *The Seduction of the Innocent,* based on the psychologist Frederic Wertham's seven-year study of the effects of comic books on America's youth. Dr. Wertham condemned most of the genre—especially crime and horror comics—for having contributed to juvenile delinquency. He cited dozens of cases of children who had committed murders, injuries, and suicides after reading comics. Batman, Robin, and Wonder Woman, he wrote, were closeted gay and lesbian superheroes, a damning

accusation in those deeply homophobic times. This was also ironic, given the fact that Wonder Woman had been created as a positive role model by a fellow psychologist, and Robin had been created to make the Batman stories lighter and more kid-friendly in tone (by giving young boys a character to identify with). But to hear Dr. Wertham tell it, comics were a four-color Sodom and Gomorrah. "If you want to raise a generation that is half storm-troopers and half cannon-fodder with a dash of illiteracy," he said, "then comic books are good! In fact, they are perfect!" Part of Wertham's disgust with comics came from a simple culture clash. Raised on classical music and fine art, he had come to America from a Europe that didn't know from crime and horror comic books, not to mention superheroes. And on arriving in the United States, he was confronted with lurid comic books and their colorful imagery. A psychologist who was trained to read between the lines, he was unable to get past the violence and sexuality he saw on the covers (some of it real, some of it imagined), and therefore he refused to accept that comic-book stories were often staunchly moral tales of courage, loyalty, and sacrifice. This is also ironic because Wertham—like Gaines—was an atheist Jew with a deeply moral point of view. Wertham had been an early champion of the civil rights movement and clearly thought he was doing the right thing by waging his anti-comics crusade. Of course, Wertham (an author and an intellectual) was a respected figure, and Gaines (a lowly comic book publisher) was not. Therefore, Gaines was the underdog in this fight and he had an uphill battle ahead of him.

MAD **creator Harvey Kurtzman in the 1970s, when he served as the mentor of a new generation of Jewish cartoonists like Art Spiegelman.**

Meanwhile a winter 1954 editorial in the *Hartford Courant* referred to comics as "the filthy stream that flows from the gold-plated sewers of New York"—"New York" possibly being a code phrase for "Jewish businesses." Comic-book burnings became a familiar sight across the country, and some of the "disgusting" literature was seized by police. The attorney general of Massachusetts called for the banning of Gaines's humor comic *Panic*—the short-lived sister title to *MAD*—after its premiere issue ran a spoof of C. C. Moore's poem "A Visit From St. Nicholas" (commonly known by its opening line, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas"), charging that it was actually stirring up a bona fide panic by "desecrating Christmas." New York police seized and quarantined issues of *Panic* until Gaines went to court and won their release. The very fact that *Panic* existed proved that *MAD* was already having its own influence within the industry. Indeed, shortly after *MAD*'s debut, imitation humor comics were churned out from rival publishers, with names like *Nuts, Whack, Unsane, Bughouse,*

Crazy, and *Eh!* Gaines saw this and surmised that if anyone should come up with a rival humor comic to capitalize on *MAD*'s success, it should be EC. It was for this reason that he tapped Al Feldstein to edit and develop *Panic;* indeed, the then-controversial cover of that premiere issue, with Santa Claus about to unwittingly step into a bear trap, was a Feldstein illustration. But the furor over *Panic* was just the tip of the iceberg.

As the outcry following the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* grew, so did the call for government intervention. The hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency opened in Manhattan federal court on April 21, 1954. Gaines volunteered to speak as a witness, as no other representatives from the comic-book business wanted to testify. Representatives of the newspaper strip industry, like the *Pogo* cartoonist Walt Kelly and the *Terry and the Pirates* cartoonist Milton Caniff, did serve as witnesses. However, newspaper strips were several notches above the lowly comic book in those days. And it didn't help Gaines's argument that while on the stand, he was somewhat groggy from the weight-loss drug Dexedrine. The more Senator Estes Kefauver and his committee grilled Gaines, the more his speech slurred. "The media jumped on that," recalled *MAD* cartoonist Drew Friedman of the televised hearings. "It was so unfair. They portrayed him as some slovenly Jewish pornographer. It was so sad."

Gaines and his business manager Lyle Stuart had stayed up all night crafting an opening statement, which was a concise and well-written defense of his industry. It read in part, "It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to a Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid …. My father was proud of the comics he published, and I am proud of the comics I publish …. The truth is that delinquency is the product of the real environment in which the child lives and not of the fiction he reads …. The problems are economic and social and they are complex. Our people need understanding; they need to have affection, decent homes, decent food." In other words, juvenile delinquency is not caused by reading comic books, but by bad parenting and poor living conditions. But it fell on deaf ears. Gaines was grilled in detail about the stories he published. At one point, Wertham went so far as to accuse one of Gaines's stories of promoting "racial intolerance," and Gaines was forced to point out that the story in question was one of a series "designed to show the evils of race prejudice." At another oft-quoted point in the hearings, Kefauver thrust a particularly nasty Johnny Craig *Crime SuspenStories* cover in Gaines's face. It depicted a man with a bloody ax holding aloft a woman's severed head.

Kefauver asked Gaines if this was in good taste. Gaines said that it *was* in good taste … for a horror comic. He then described how if the comic were in bad taste, the head would have been held higher so that the neck stump would be seen as visibly dripping with blood. In fact, Gaines had asked Johnny Craig to tone down the gore factor of that cover, as Craig's original drawing matched Gaines's "bad taste" description. Gaines had hoped to communicate the fact that he was a moral man who had standards of decency. But the Dexedrine may have impaired his judgment at this point too, for he could have done a more convincing job of defending himself. Thereafter, TV and news reports latched on to this "severed head" exchange, quoting it endlessly as an example of the immoral attitude of comic-book publishers.

That summer, sales of comic books faced an industry-wide slump. Reeling from this debacle, Gaines called an emergency meeting of his fellow comic-book publishers, who agreed with him that immediate action was necessary—but instead of fighting back, they decided to form a self-censoring comics authority. They also voted to ban the words "crime, horror, terror, and weird" from comic books, effectively casting EC as the scapegoat for the entire industry, since most of Gaines's titles contained at least one of these words. Gaines had no choice but to suspend publication of his horror and suspense comics.

Officially established on September 16, 1954, the Comics Code Authority, headed by the former judge Charles F. Murphy, transformed the genre. Ninety percent of the industry adopted the CCA's code, which prohibited the depiction of vampires, zombies, werewolves, and ghouls. Policemen, government employees, and other authority figures had to be portrayed in a respectful manner; evil characters could be depicted only for the purpose of illuminating a moral issue; and all "lurid, unsavory, and gruesome" illustrations were banished. To be sold on newsstands or in drugstores, comic books had to carry the "Approved" Comics Code Authority seal.

By 1955, the only EC publication still in print was *MAD,* which had dodged the axe through a clever maneuver—Gaines transformed the comic book into a magazine (issue #24, sold for 25 cents), exempting it from CCA regulations. As Peter Kuper pointed out, "It's incredibly ironic that the House Un-American Activities Committee that attacked EC and essentially knocked them out for their subversive
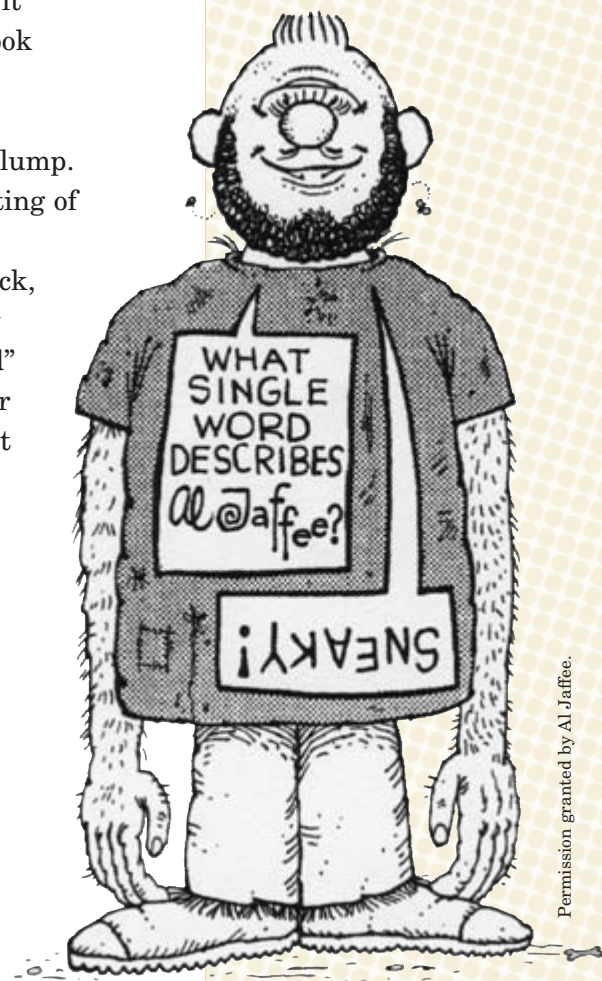
Among *MAD* contributors, Al Jaffee is known as the "Mad inventor"; famous for innovations like the "Fold-In" (a parody of the fold-outs seen in men's magazines such as *Playboy*). His inventiveness is even on display in this self-caricature with a upside-down face.
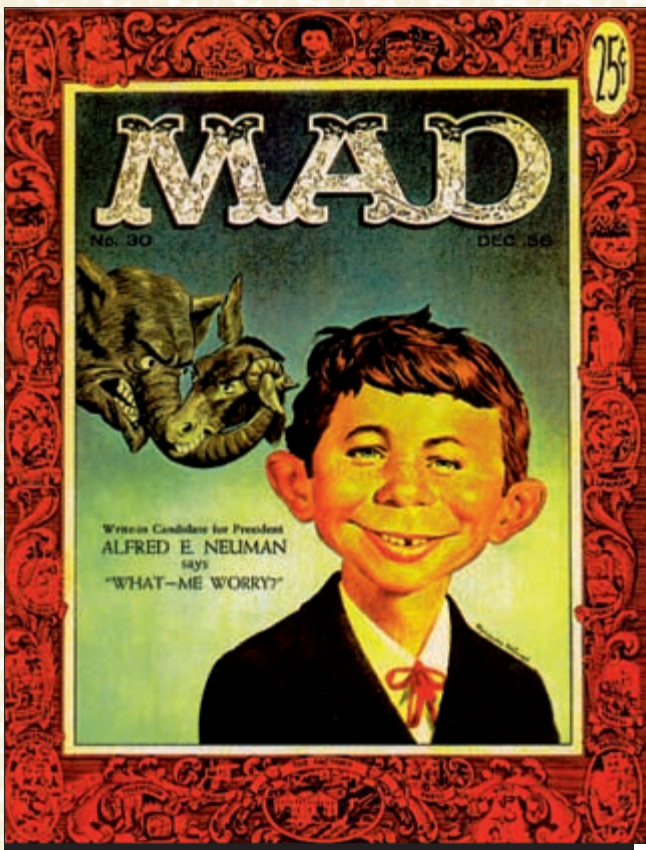
During the 1950s, the *MAD Magazine* mascot, Alfred E. Neuman, became a synonym for idiocy—so of course he ran for president.

nature left them one thing standing and that was *MAD Magazine,* which was ultimately the most subversive thing that they ever produced." Gaines had actually made the change to appease Harvey Kurtzman, who had been offered a job at *Pageant* magazine. Not wanting to lose the editor of his best-selling title (the only two other titles to survive the Code the previous year were *Panic* and *Incredible Science Fiction*), and knowing that *MAD,* with its racy material, wouldn't get Code approval, Gaines decided to let Kurtzman transform *MAD* into a magazine. Aside from better printing and layout, *MAD Magazine* also benefited from work by the cartooning mainstays Will Elder, Wally Wood, and Jack Davis, as well as the TV personality Ernie Kovacs, the song parodist Stan Freberg, and the humorist Roger Price. And newer cartoonists started cropping up, like Al Jaffee and Phil Interlandi. There was a new logo, and an odd-looking gap-toothed boy began to make appearances in various places around the magazine under a variety of silly names. Atop the border to *MAD* #24, the goofy kid appears above the puzzling caption, "What? Me Worry?"

After *MAD*'s first five issues as a magazine, Kurtzman was wooed by the *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner. Hefner was a big fan of cartooning and a bigger fan of Kurtzman. Thus emboldened, Kurtzman went to Gaines and demanded 51 percent ownership of *MAD,* a demand he knew Gaines would refuse. Kurtzman left *MAD* to start the short-lived humor magazine *Trump* for Hefner (he would also later create the long-running "Little Annie Fanny" comic strip for *Playboy*). Meanwhile, Feldstein picked up *MAD*'s editorial reins, giving the gap-toothed boy an official name—Alfred E. Neuman—and turning the magazine away from Kurtzman's anarchic voice and toward the more accessible *MAD* we know today. Many of the magazine's regular features, including Antonio Prohias's "Spy Vs. Spy," Al Jaffee's "Fold-In," Dave Berg's "Lighter Side Of …," and Sergio Aragones's "*MAD* Marginals" didn't debut until Feldstein took over as editor of *MAD,* a post he held for nearly three decades. Cartoonists like Don Martin, Bob Clarke, and George Woodbridge, and writers like Tom Koch, John Ficarra, and Dick DeBartolo, were all hired under Feldstein's editorial regime. For this reason, a "Kurtzman cult" has since emerged, consisting of people who consider the Kurtzman-edited issues of *MAD* stellar comedic achievements, and

the rest pale imitations. But it's also arguable that, had Kurtzman continued as *MAD*'s guiding light, the magazine would have been the product of a singular artistic voice but wouldn't have lasted very long. Feldstein reshaped *MAD* in such a way that it could weather changing times and shifting trends, staying relevant and edgy and not beholden to the whims of one particular writer/editor. Rather, Feldstein instigated a revolving door of comedic talent, discovering dozens of freelance cartoonists and comedy writers, many of whom have stayed with the magazine for decades out of sheer loyalty. And along the way, *MAD* has influenced everything from the rival humor mag *National Lampoon* to filmmakers like the Zucker brothers (*Airplane*) to TV shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*. The magazine is required reading for aspiring comedy writers, cartoonists, and stand-up comedians. *MAD*'s ad parodies have even, ironically, influenced many of the humorous ads one now sees on television and in print. "*MAD* had more influence on the way humor is now," said Peter Kuper, "and more influence on how people are willing to talk about advertisers, and contradictions, and to attack the pillars of society."

One key element of *MAD*'s appeal that was passed down from the Kurtzman years and continued during the Feldstein years (and beyond) was the magazine's inherent sense of Jewishness. To this day, Yiddish phrases are still frequently used in the magazine, as are Jewish themes. And it's no stretch to say that this is at least partly because *MAD* has consistently used Jewish cartoonists like Al Jaffee, Dave Berg, and Mort Drucker, and Jewish writers like Arnie Kogen and Frank Jacobs. The Jewish upbringing of many of the *MAD* contributors is evident from a random look at the magazine's content.

MANY MAD SCRIBES have gone on to successful careers writing for film and TV: a partial list includes Dennis Snee (the Rodney Dangerfield film *Back to School*), Stan Hart *(The Carol Burnett Show)*, Arnie Kogen *(Newhart)*, and Tony Barbieri *(Jimmy Kimmel Live)*. And in the early 1970s, a smart-alecky kid named Chevy Chase briefly wrote for *MAD* before becoming the first breakout star of *Saturday Night Live.* Meanwhile, many *MAD* artists have become ubiquitous in the world of commercial illustration: Bob Clarke designed perennial Rankin/Bass holiday TV specials like *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,* Jack Davis illustrated movie posters for films like *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World,* and Sergio Aragones designed the animated opening sequence for *TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes.*

In February 1994's *MAD* #325, the writer Jonathan Bresman and the artist Mort Drucker ask the question, "What If Superman Were Raised by Jewish Parents?" The piece posits what would have happened if Superman had been found not by WASPy Jonathan and Martha Kent of Kansas, but rather by Hyman and Doris Feldstein of Brooklyn. "Herman," as the alien baby is named by his parents,

proves impossible to circumsize, and grows up to be every Jewish mother's dream, a doctor. Doris's final comment is, "Oh, such a boy! And to think we found him in that goyische rocket ship!" In *MAD* #346, from June 1996, the piece "Biblical Pet Peeves," written by Barry Liebmann and (again) illustrated by Mort Drucker, contains such Jewish-tinged biblical pet peeves as: "Learning that a plague is killing off all the first-born males right before your prom!" and "Wandering in the desert for 40 years because your holier-than-thou husband is too stubborn to ask for directions!" More recently, this author even got into the act. Josh Malinow and I wrote "What If Chris Rock Performed at a Bar Mitzvah?" for July 2002's *MAD* #419. In this piece, illustrated by the acclaimed cartoonist Drew Friedman, we imagined Chris Rock, the edgy, no-holds-barred comedian, tailoring his act for a conservative, suburban Jewish audience at young Adam Marmelstein's bar mitzvah. It featured barbs like, "I think all the black-on-black crime has got to stop. You Jews don't have no Jew-on-Jew crime; the closest thing you've got is Richard Lewis ripping off Woody Allen's 'I'm depressed' act!" and "Before we started, Adam's grandfather was talking to me in Yiddish! Yiddish! That's like the Jewish jive talk, or as I call it, 'Hebonics'!" Of course, here we were parodying the real-life trend of entertainers like the comedian Jackie Mason and the pop group 'N Sync performing at bar mitzvahs for exorbitant fees.

MAD's conversion in 1955 from a comic book to a magazine not only saved the iconic humor publication from extinction, it also marked the end of the so-called Golden Age of comic books. Although this Golden Age may not have been truly golden, with creators such as Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, and Harvey Kurtzman, it resonated a brilliance all its own. The Golden Age also inspires fond memories when one thinks of the work produced during that era. Iconic characters such as Superman, who are unflagging in their popularity seven decades after their creation, provide a reason for remembering this as an age of gold. And the presence of Jews in comic books during this Golden Age was like a drama in two acts. In act one, Jews seeking to escape poverty invented a new medium that melded art and storytelling and projected subconsciously Jewish

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY other Jewish contributors to MAD over the years. They include cartoonists like Peter Kuper, Evan Dorkin, Max Brandel, and Paul Peter Porges; writers like Gary Belkin, Larry Siegel, Matthew A. Cohen, and Scott Sonneborn; and editorial/production staffers like Lenny "the Beard" Brenner, Greg Leitman, and David Shayne. And when the magazine was publishing the work of celebrity contributors during the late 1950s, Jewish comedians like Sid Caesar, Danny Kaye, Tom Lehrer, and Carl Reiner proudly dubbed themselves members of *MAD's* "Usual Gang of Idiots."

power fantasies onto their stereotypically gentile superhero creations. And with the advent of World War II, the Jewish metaphors inherent in Nazi-clobbering characters such as Captain America became more pronounced. During the Golden Age's shorter second act, EC's brief but memorable seven-year reign as Entertaining Comics was marked by an overriding concern about morality, sometimes emanating from a Jewish sensibility. In the words of Stan Lee: "To me you can wrap all of Judaism up in one sentence, and that is, 'Do unto others.' All I tried to do in my stories was show that there's some innate goodness in the human condition. And there's always going to be evil; we should always be fighting evil."

A CONVERSATION WITH
HARVEY KURTZMAN AND... ARNOLD ROTH AND AL JAFFEE

Permission granted by Al Jaffee.

For five decades, Al Jaffee has been a pivotal member of the "Usual Gang of Idiots" at *MAD,* having been hand-picked by the original *MAD* editor Harvey Kurtzman back in the 1950s. Here's a group portrait by Jaffee of himself, Kurtzman, and the *New Yorker* artist Arnold Roth.

Part Two The Silver Age

(1956–1978) THE *GROWTH* AND *DEVELOPMENT* OF JEWISH COMICS

SUPER FAMILY VALUES

Superman is an enduring icon, as American as apple pie. But is he a metaphor for the immigrant experience?

With the end of the Golden Age of comic books, the industry was in need of a creative tune-up. After the 1954 Senate Hearings, comic books were equated with illiteracy and delinquency, and sales took a severe beating. And thanks to the newly created Comics Code Authority, by 1956 crime and horror comics had ceased publication, science-fiction comics were tamed, and there were strict rules placed on what sort of material was considered appropriate for the industry's leading genre, superheroes, who had already begun a sharp decline in popularity. It's true that superheroes had never quite been as popular as they were during World War II, when they were busting Nazis for Uncle Sam, but now they were less fashionable than ever. It didn't help that the traditional comic-book outlets—mom and pop general stores, corner newsstands, and neighborhood candy stores—were on their way out. This was two decades before the advent of the comic-book specialty shop, and over a decade before the first comic book convention. For the remainder of the 1950s, superheroes were a pale shell of their former selves. Captain Marvel, the Sub-Mariner, Plastic Man—all of them had been driven into extinction. Publishers such as Quality and Fawcett had long since shuttered their doors. Timely (now called Atlas) was having trouble figuring out how to stay afloat, and in November 1956 the Atlas publisher Martin Goodman closed his own distribution arm and signed a restrictive deal with DC, which would only distribute Atlas Comics if Atlas published a measly eight titles a month so as to not be a real threat.

But DC wasn't doing that well either. For one thing, it characters seemed to be going through an identity crisis. Batman, who had admittedly become a more lighthearted character ever since Robin arrived on the scene in 1940, had at least retained a stable of appropriately creepy villains like the Joker, Two-Face, and the Scarecrow throughout the 1940s. And even if the character's tone during that period was more akin to Chester Gould's quirky comic

strip *Dick Tracy* than Bob Kane, and Bill Finger's noir-drenched original vision, there was still something nightmarish about Batman during that era. But during the 1950s, Batman stories were heavily peppered with science-fiction elements, and the Dark Knight devolved into a high-camp boy scout with a sky-blue cowl, battling alien invaders and traveling through time. In "The Valley of the Giant Bees" from *Batman* #84 (June 1954), Robin is captured and made to dance like a fool as the court jester of a mammoth bee known as the Queen Bee. Not quite what one would expect from a "Dark Knight." Ace, the Bat-Hound, made his debut in 1955; the pooch even had a mask and secret identity, just like his master. And the red-and-yellow-clad Batwoman first appeared in 1956, saving Batman from a giant robot. Batman's writers and editors seemed to be running out of ideas to combat slumping sales, and the tone of the Caped Crusader's stories was shifting from surreal adventure to high camp. During the 1960s Batman's books would get even weirder, with appearances by a red and green Batgirl (since when do Batman characters go for a "Christmas-friendly" look?) and an inter-dimensional troublemaking elf known as Bat-Mite. Batman even became "Bat-Baby" during one ludicrous 1962 adventure.

Superman fared better for several reasons, one of which was the popular 1950s TV series *The Adventures of Superman* starring George Reeves as the Man of Steel, which revitalized sales of his comics during this difficult era. Siegel's and Shuster's original conception of Superman as social crusader was used as a template for this series, and in a 1954 interview, Reeves said, "We even try, in our scripts, to give gentle messages of tolerance and to stress that a man's color and race and religious beliefs should be respected." But the various Superman comic-book titles, though not subject to the awkward tonal shifts of Batman, went through their share of weirdness during the 1950s as well. This period (roughly 1950–70) is commonly known as the Weisinger Era, after Mort Weisinger, who was then the group editor of Superman's comic-book titles. A former editor of pulp magazines like *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Startling Stories,* the curmudgeonly Weisinger had also corresponded with fellow Jewish sci-fi fan Jerry Siegel when they were teenagers. Siegel now found himself working for Weisinger, albeit without a byline as retribution from his lawsuit. Superman was always a more whimsical character than the Dark Knight, but here the Man of Steel's adventures bordered on the Super-whimsical. If Batman gained a sort of "Batman family" during the 1950s and 1960s, adding a female counterpart (a wife figure), a teenage girl (a daughter surrogate), and a dog (the family pet) to his team, Superman discovered more long-

lost relatives during this period than most people would find with the help of the most seasoned private investigator. *Adventure Comics #210* (March 1955) introduced Superman's pet dog, Krypto, which the Man of Steel's father had launched into space as a test before sending his son to Earth. In 1958's *Action Comics #242*, we are introduced to the bottle city of Kandor, an entire town full of refugee Kryptonians who had been shrunk down to microscopic size before Krypton's destruction by the villain Brainiac. And in May 1959's *Action Comics #252*, we meet Superman's cousin Kara, aka Supergirl. Later that same year we would meet Beppo the Super-monkey. For the lone survivor of a dead planet, Superman was a lot less lonely during the 1950s and 1960s; clearly the folks at DC were tinkering with the very premise of Superman in an attempt to jump-start reader interest. It was as though the creative teams behind both Superman and Batman were going to absurd lengths to stress the "family" aspects of their comics, lest another Dr. Wertham come along and accuse these superheroes of not representing family values.

Against all this craziness, in 1956 DC settled on an intriguing strategy: revamping its line of second-string characters. Wary about making any radical changes to its flagship properties (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) lest they diminish audience recognition of these icons, DC felt it was less risky to revitalize its lesser-known superheroes. But this decision wasn't as calculated as one might imagine. It was largely a question of getting the right artist-writer team together. And this took someone with vision, someone like DC editor Julius Schwartz.

BROOME MAKES A CLEAN SWEEP

Julius "Julie" Schwartz was, like Mort Weisinger, a former pen pal of Jerry Siegel. As a teenager in New York, Schwartz was good friends with Weisinger; the two science-fiction nuts started up the fanzine *The Time Traveller* in the early 1930s with their friends Forrest J. Ackerman and Alan Glasser. Schwartz and Weisinger even served as gossip columnists for Siegel's and Shuster's short-lived fanzine *Science Fiction*. An industry veteran by the 1950s, Schwartz had been working professionally in comics since 1944, when he was hired by Sheldon Mayer as an editor at All-American. Mayer took on the jovial Jewish bookworm at the behest of Alfred Bester, who was then chronicling the adventures of the Green Lantern for AA. Bester would soon go on to become a prominent science-fiction writer. In those days, many novelists and screenwriters—among them Leigh Brackett (*The Empire Strikes Back*), Robert Bloch (*Psycho*), and Henry Kuttner (*The Twonky*)—cut their authorial teeth writing comic books. And Schwartz, a former literary agent who had represented several young science-fiction writers, put many of his former clients to work on comics he was editing. One of those clients was a Jewish short story writer named John Broome. Born Irving Broome in 1913, he changed his first name to John early in his writing career. Recommended by his friend, the fellow science-fiction writer David Vern (who wrote under the pen name David V. Reed), John Broome started writing Green Lantern stories in 1946. The Green Lantern, aka the radio announcer Alan Scott, had a magic ring that was powered by a lantern and impervious to anything but wood. He was an intriguing character, but like other superheroes, his popularity and the sales of his comic books plummeted as the 1940s became the 1950s. By 1951, only Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were popular enough to have their own comic-book titles.

Then in 1956, Schwartz began editing a new title called *Showcase,* which, as the name implied, served as a showcase for new characters. In the first three issues, *Showcase* featured the adventures of such "ordinary heroes" as firefighters, frogmen, and so on. It made sense; conventional wisdom said that superheroes were on the way out, and

The Silver Age Green Lantern was devised by the artist Gil Kane (born Eli Kane) to resemble, the Jewish actor Paul Newman. Kane also designed the Guardians of the Universe to resemble the Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion.

DC was scrambling to find the next big trend. But Schwartz decided to do something daring for the *Showcase* #4 (September-October 1956): he introduced a new superhero or, more accurately, he revamped an old superhero. Since the end of World War II, DC had owned the rights to the All-American line, which included characters like Wonder Woman, the Green Lantern, the Hawkman, the Atom, and the Flash. Together with the writer Robert Kanigher and the artists Carmine Infantino (penciler) and Joe Kubert (inker), Schwartz created a new version of the Flash. All four comics veterans had worked on the Golden Age Flash, and they agreed that a different approach was needed. Gone was the Flash's old costume, inspired by the Greek God Hermes. Gone, too, was the old character who previously wore the mantle of the Flash, the policeman Jay Garrick. This new Flash would have naught to do with his predecessor save for the power of super-speed (and like Jay Garrick, this new Flash would gain his powers via an accidental immersion in a chemical bath). His costume would be more modern, something futuristic and sleek. The new Flash was Barry Allen, a police scientist with a stylish crew cut who was known for being late to every appointment. Ironic, since he was the Fastest Man Alive! We first meet Barry Allen in "The Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt!," the first story in *Showcase* #4.

But it's the backup Flash story from that issue, "The Man Who Broke the Time Barrier," that's just as important, because this was the first of the Barry Allen Flash's chronicles to be written by John Broome. And while Robert Kanigher co-created the character, he only wrote a handful of other Flash stories intermittently throughout the remainder of the 1950s. Broome picked up the slack after "The Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," writing the bulk of the Flash's tales and quickly establishing himself as the character's principal author during the '50s and '60s. His creative partner in this endeavor was Carmine Infantino, who became the premier Flash artist of this era. Along the way, Broome and Infantino famously created a colorful supporting cast for the Flash to play off of, including his sidekick Kid Flash (aka Wally West), his friend Elongated Man, and villains such as Gorilla Grodd and Captain Boomerang. The fact that so many of these characters have survived in the hands of subsequent Flash writers like

Mike Baron and Geoff Johns is a testament to the lasting power of Broome's work. But more important, Broome revitalized the superhero genre, for after three more tryout appearances of the Barry Allen Flash in *Showcase* #8, #13, and #14 and the universal fan acclaim that followed, the unanimous decision was to give the Scarlet Speedster his own title. Actually, DC just picked up the Flash's long-discontinued title with *Flash* #105, February-March 1959. This was the first successful new superhero title in 17 years, and it proved that the superhero genre was not dead. Other minor superheroes had been conceived during the 1950s, such as J'onn J'onnz, Martian Manhunter (his adventures ran as a backup feature in *Detective Comics*), but none had the sheer impact of the Barry Allen Flash. Considering his role in the resuscitation of the superhero comic book, Barry Allen is often cited as the first official Silver Age comic-book hero. The term "Silver Age" connotes the change in attitude from the Golden Age. The comics industry was now a bit older, a bit wiser, and changes were taking place. Big changes.

Figuring that if one superhero could be successfully revived then others might follow, in 1959, DC publisher Irwin Donenfeld (Harry Donenfeld's son) approached Schwartz about working the same mojo on the Green Lantern. And so, Schwartz again teamed with Broome to create a new version of the Emerald Crusader, this time working with the artist Gil Kane (born Eli Katz). Broome's and Kane's Silver Age Green Lantern—which debuted in *Showcase* #22, September-October 1959—was also a departure from his Golden Age counterpart. And as he had with the Flash, Broome streamlined this Green Lantern. Alan Scott (the Golden Age Green Lantern) had a magic ring but sometimes fought sci-fi oriented villains, thereby mixing fantasy and science fiction. However, this Green Lantern—aka the test pilot Hal Jordan—had a ring powered by alien science, which fit the science-fiction world that Broome and Kane crafted around the character. For example, Hal Jordan was only one of many Green Lanterns who patrolled the galaxy as part of an interplanetary peacekeeping force. Together, they formed the Green Lantern Corps, which labored under the tutelage of the

OTHER JOHN BROOME/CARMINE INFANTINO

Flash villains include Mirror Master, Pied Piper, Trickster, Weather Wizard, Reverse Flash, Abra Kadabra, and Dr. Alchemy. And although Robert Kanigher handed writing chores for the Flash over to Broome, it's not as though Kanigher was wanting for work. During this period, Kanigher's energy leaned more toward war comics like *Our Army at War* featuring Sgt. Rock and his rugged Easy Company. The Sgt. Rock stories were set during World War II, and Rock and his men battled Axis goons. Here, Kanigher and artist Joe Kubert (both Jewish) continued the tradition of Jewish writers and the artists depicting Nazi-battling heroes.

Guardians of the Universe, a race of short sedentary blue men who operated out of the planet Oa. Each Lantern was assigned a space sector to patrol, a power ring that could do nearly anything the wearer willed, and a battery-style lantern with which to recharge their rings. The genius of Broome's conception of the Green Lantern Corps is that it was almost like a science-fiction police department, with rings instead of guns and lanterns instead of badges. This gave the Green Lantern—unlike other superheroes—a concrete reason for wearing a colorful costume; this was his uniform. Hal Jordan's beat was space sector 2814, which included the Earth. Green Lanterns hailing from any number of alien planets abounded, giving the artists' and writers' imaginations free reign. "The nice thing about Green Lantern," noted Jon Bogdanove, "was that you can invent a Green Lantern! There are a million of them!" Indeed, the Green Lantern of Barrio III was a crystalline sphere with tentacle-shaped arms, and the Green Lantern of Rojira was an orange humanoid with an enlarged cranium, pointed ears, and a nose on his forehead (no, that's not a misprint). The Green Lantern Corps was a cartoonist's dream, and Gil Kane dove into it with relish, imaginatively designing any number of oddball alien friends and foes to alternately help and hinder Hal Jordan.

Courtesy of Larry Broome.

Broome in 1967

DURING JOHN BROOME'S LIFETIME (he died in 1999), he had an adventuresome spirit and was a world traveler. From 1946 to 1970, he wrote for DC Comics, but during those years he would often be away from the Manhattan-based DC offices for months at a time, pounding away at the typewriter on some exotic shore. He was allowed this sort of leeway because of his long-standing friendship with the editor Julius Schwartz. And it was a true friendship. "I talked to Julius Schwartz [about John] in 2003, about a year before [Schwartz] passed away," explained John's cousin Larry Broome. "He got rather quiet and his voice cracked the first time we spoke. He said, 'John was my best friend. He made my job as an editor so much fun and rather easy. He always knew which way to go with a story and was so creative and entertaining. He could've been successful in any phase of creative writing, but chose comics as his medium.'" After Broome left comics in 1970, the wanderlust still beckoned and he ended up living and teaching English in Japan.

And the fact that Broome and Kane were "members of the Tribe" meant that occasional Jewish signifiers filtered into the stories. For example, the identical Guardians of the Universe were all clearly designed to resemble the Israeli prime minster David Ben-Gurion, a fact that Broome, Schwartz, and Kane commented on at length during their lifetimes. Hal Jordan himself was designed by Kane to resemble the actor Paul Newman, which may not have even been an intentional Jewish signifier, since not many people know that Newman's father was Jewish. And Broome often used the series to promote the idea of racial tolerance, as in the 1961 story "The Battle of the Power Rings!" from *Green Lantern* (second series) #9, where his narration intones, "Yet despite their diversity, all the Green Lanterns are highly intelligent and

equally adept at projecting their thoughts to overcome the language barrier." Here we see Broome using the Green Lantern as a powerful metaphor for the human condition, which is the function of much science fiction. The intergalactic diversity of the Green Lantern Corps is a metaphor for the ethnic diversity Broome wished for all peoples.

As with the Flash, the Green Lantern soon merited his own series. And in 1960, the superhero team book was resuscitated with the *Justice League of America.* But while these updated superheroes boosted sales for DC, it wasn't quite the tidal wave of new interest the industry as a whole required. Moreover, it was more of the same. As they were since 1938, superheroes at DC and elsewhere remained colorfully clad protectors with flawless physiques, secret identities, cheerful demeanors, and nary a care in the world. And no one dared change the formula.

But comics publishers did try their hand at other genres. As opposed to the gritty crime and horror comics of the pre-Wertham era, there were romance comics like *Young Love,* published by Crestwood/Prize (which flourished at a time when nearly half of all comics readers were girls); medieval fantasy comics such as *The Black Knight,* published by Atlas; and humor titles like Sheldon Mayer's *Sugar and Spike,* a fondly remembered DC series about two lovable infants. Robert Kanigher's and Joe Kubert's DC war comics from the 1950s (*G.I. Combat, Star-Spangled War*) nearly rivaled the sales of superhero titles of that period. And one can't soon forget Carl Barks's legendary run on *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* for Western Publishing during this era. All held the attention of the nation's children for a brief period, but none could claim the popularity of Superman or his Golden Age compatriots. Comic books needed a good sock in the jaw—and they were about to get it!

The Nazi-battling war hero Sgt. Rock was created by the Jewish writer/artist team of Robert Kanigher and Joe Kubert. The character was developed during the 1950s but still remains a fan favorite.

STAN AND JACK
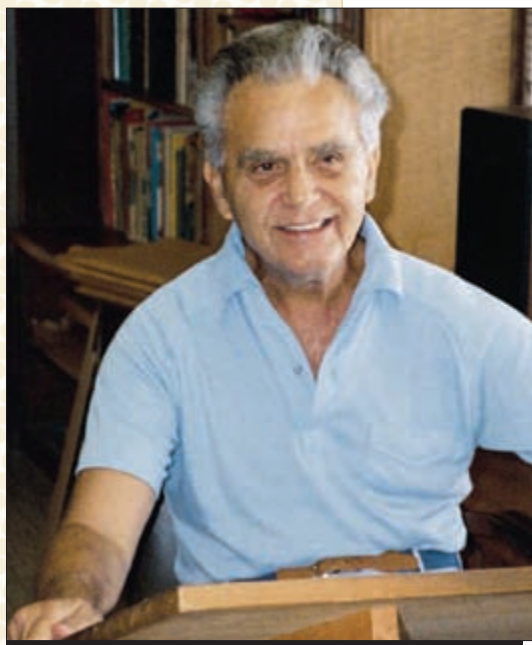
The cartoonist Jack Kirby at his drawing table.

Courtesy of Lisa Kirby.

By 1961, Stan Lee had reached a career crossroads as the chief writer/editor of Martin Goodman's comic-book company. The Goodman line had had success with a trio of superheroes back during World War II—Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch—but World War II was in the past, and so were the company's salad days. By 1957, Lee, formerly the overseer of a bullpen of artists and writers who worked happily from within the Empire State Building, had been shoved into a tiny, two-office space on Madison Avenue that was home to Magazine Management, the parent company of Goodman's publishing concerns. Goodman's comics company, originally called Timely, had dropped the name Atlas Comics, being an officially nameless comic book company for the next few years. The Goodman line worked hard to pump out over a dozen bimonthly western and romance titles, becoming one of the industry's most prolific comic book houses. But because of constant budget slashing and downsizing, it frequently fell on the editorial director Lee to fire, then later rehire, many of the cartoonists. The stress was starting to get Lee down. One bright spot was the science-fiction books Lee edited and wrote starting in late 1958, many in collaboration with his brother Larry Lieber. These were stories of giant monsters, clearly influenced by the Godzilla-style movies then proliferating at drive-in movie theaters. Lee would later dub the creatures in these books BEMs, which stood for Bug-Eyed Monsters. Jack Kirby, who had ironically been Lee's boss in 1940 when Lee started his comics career, had by the late 1950s fallen into something of a professional slump, and so returned to Timely/Atlas as a hired gun working for Lee. So, also in late 1958, Kirby started delineating some of the giant monster stories Lee wrote. By 1960, Kirby became a genuine fan favorite for his illustrations of slime-dripping BEMs and could be counted on to contribute artwork to at least one monster story per issue in titles like *Tales of Suspense, Journey Into Mystery,* and *Strange Tales.* The delight Lee took in spinning these yarns is evident in the daffy names he gave to the monsters, like Fin Fang Foom, Grottu, and Vandoom.

But despite the fun he was having with the monster books, Stan Lee still felt comics were no medium for a serious writer. He had even

changed his name early on because he was so ashamed of being associated with the comic-book field. "Comics in those days, everybody looked down their nose at them," Lee remembers today. "They were at the bottom of the cultural totem pole. And I figured, 'Someday I'm going to be a great writer. I don't want to use the name Stanley Martin Lieber for these lousy comics.' Little dreaming I'd stay in comics forever." Now he was feeling like comics were an albatross around his neck, and he wanted to be relieved of the burden as soon as possible. He seriously considered a career change.

Then one day in 1961, fate beckoned. Martin Goodman called Stan Lee into his office and demanded that Lee come up with a superhero book. Lee didn't understand; superheroes were on their way out, or so he had thought. It seemed that Goodman had been playing golf with DC's publisher Jack Liebowitz, and the latter was bragging about the success of DC's new book, *The Justice League of America,* which combined the revamped Flash and Green Lantern with mainstays like Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman and newer heroes like Martian Manhunter to form a team of superheroes. Superhero teams such as DC's Justice Society of America and Timely's All Winners Squad had been popular during the Golden Age, but by the early 1950s, most superhero groups had disbanded due to lack of interest. Now it seemed the pendulum had started to swing the other way, partially because of reader interest in the Barry Allen Flash and the Hal Jordan Green Lantern, and partially because superhero team books had been absent for so long that, to the new crop of kids reading comics in the early 1960s, the very concept of a superhero team was fresh and exciting. Everything old, it seemed, was new again.

So this is how it stood: Lee, sick to death of comic books and considering abandoning the industry altogether, was supposed to create a new title about a team of superheroes. And as he would later recall, he wouldn't have even taken up Goodman's challenge if his wife, Joan, hadn't spurred him on: "My wife said, 'You're going to leave the company anyway, why not try something different for a change?'" For the past two decades, Lee had been writing comics the way Goodman dictated that they should be written. Lee's wife

The Golden Age of comics was also the Golden Age of kid sidekicks, as we see from this comic book featuring Captain America's sidekick, Bucky, and the Human Torch's sidekick, Toro.

encouraged him to write a comic book *his* way—to go out with a bang. The result, in November 1961, was something called *Fantastic Four* #1, written by Lee and penciled by Jack Kirby. The first issue of *Fantastic Four* heralded a subset of the Silver Age now known as "The Marvel Age" of comics, a period of seemingly limitless artistic and creative growth for Lee and Kirby, which lasted roughly from 1961 to 1969. The first issue of *Fantastic Four,* then, was a way for both Lee and Kirby to redeem themselves from their respective artistic ennui and reclaim a spot at the top of the comic-book heap. By 1963, the Goodman comic-book line formerly known as both Timely and Atlas would permanently be branded Marvel Comics, a name that had been used on and off for many years; in fact, it was originally the name of one of the company's premier comic-book titles. *Marvel Comics* #1, cover-dated November 1939, contained the first appearances of Carl Burgos's original Human Torch and Bill Everett's Sub-Mariner, two long-lasting characters that would be subsequently revived during the Marvel Age.

Starting with issue #3, *Fantastic Four* would be billed as "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine." It wasn't just hyperbole. "Stan Lee is as important to comics as people like Irving Thalberg and Louis B. Meyer and the other movie moguls were to Hollywood," claimed the veteran Marvel Comics scribe Chris Claremont (*X-Men, New Mutants, Excalibur*). "He is that important. He is a giant." While DC's revamped Flash and Green Lantern titles proved that superheroes could be marketable again, they were merely a blip on the comics sales radar screen. Truly, the industry hadn't seen anything like *The Fantastic Four* since the glory days of the early 1940s. Not only did sales of the *Fantastic Four* skyrocket past what anyone had expected, the title was successful because of an intrinsic quality the Justice League couldn't hope to match: artistic innovation. *The Fantastic Four* was edgy, sexy, new. By comparison, the JLA seemed old hat.

Lee and Kirby innovatively layered their stories with a heaping helping of character development. The premiere issue of *Fantastic Four* was about four friends on a space mission. The Scientific genius Reed Richards, his shy fiancée Sue Storm, her hot-tempered kid brother Johnny Storm, and Reed's friend, the curmudgeonly pilot Ben Grimm, all took off into outer space where they were bombarded with cosmic rays. Upon landing back on Earth, they discovered that each had been gifted with special powers. Reed, aka Mr. Fantastic, could stretch his body like a rubber band. Sue, alias Invisible Girl, could turn invisible. Johnny, otherwise known as the Human Torch (not to

be confused with Carl Burgos's visually similar android the Human Torch) could set his body on fire. And Ben, now also known as the Thing, experienced the most radical and visible change: his body had been forever changed into a lumpy pile of orange rocks. So far, ordinary comic-book stuff.

But where ordinary superheroes would then band together and selflessly fight evil from behind colorful masks and capes, The Fantastic Four punched a gigantic hole in most of those genre conventions. This is because Lee was finally given carte blanche to create comics his own way by a desperate Martin Goodman. "I wrote the Marvel characters the way I wanted to," Lee explained, "and I wrote the [Timely/Atlas] characters the way my publisher wanted me to." Upon landing back on Earth, instead of vowing to fight the good fight, these four didn't act very "fantastic." In fact, they were immediately at odds with each other and full of self-loathing. Ben Grimm thought of himself as a hideous freak, and his unfulfilled crush on Sue was now compounded since no normal gal would love a monster like him. Eventually the foursome does decide to put on costumes and fight crime, but they didn't have masks or secret identities. Everyone knew that Mr. Fantastic's real name was Reed Richards. As Chris Claremont elaborated, "This was the innovative thing about Marvel's characters. We know Reed Richards as Reed Richards. Mr. Fantastic is the put-on, the disguise. It's about Reed Richards. As opposed to DC's heroes. In the DC universe, Superman is the real person and Clark Kent, that's the disguise."

Moreover, the Fantastic Four's reactions toward themselves and to each other were far more realistic than those of the average superhero. Here were heroes with feet of clay, with flaws. They often had money problems, a rarity in the superhero world where wealthy billionaires like Bruce Wayne typically used their vast riches to finance their heroic exploits. More important, though, the Fantastic Four had relationship problems as well. Unlike those of Superman, these relationship dilemmas weren't the result of a mind control ray, and often the status quo wasn't reset by the end of the issue. The overly cerebral workaholic Reed Richards would sometimes neglect Sue to pursue his scientific experiments, driving her into the arms of the Atlantean monarch known as Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner,
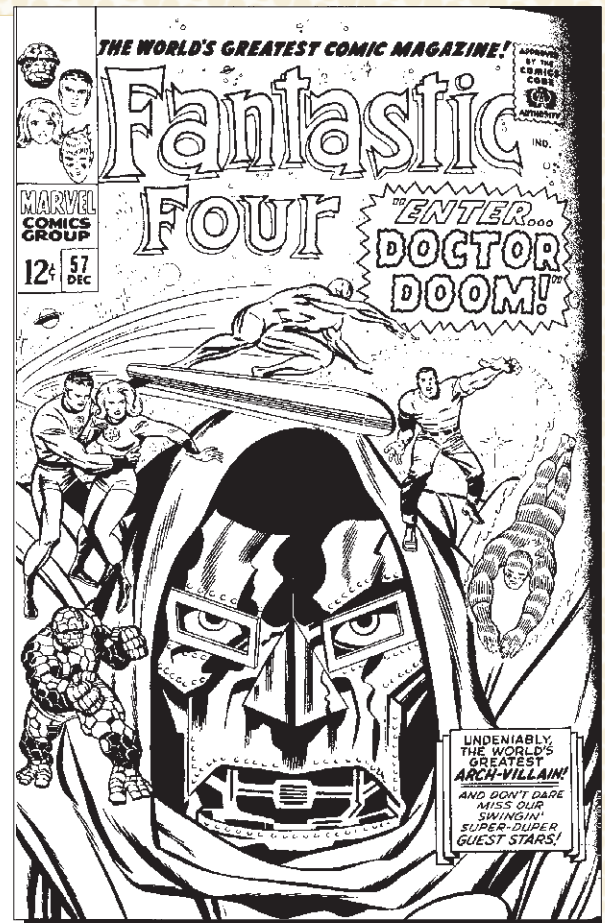
Among Jack Kirby's many strengths was his ability to fashion strange new gadgetry, like Doctor Doom's unearthly facemask.
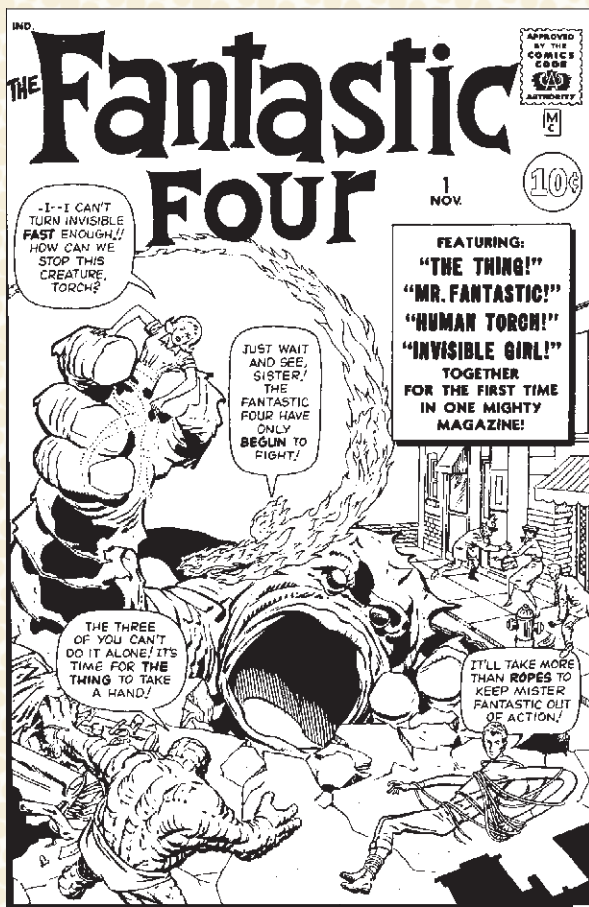
The Fantastic Four's Ben Grimm, aka The Thing, soon became that title's most popular character. The Thing appears at the bottom left corner of this comic-book cover.

recently revived from years of inactivity. In fact, the reason that Namor is revived is that Johnny Storm has a fight with his teammates and ends up in a flophouse where he sees an amnesiac bum he recognizes as … The Sub-Mariner! The fact that the FF's stories would often arise from their constant bickering and love triangles was riveting, bold, character-driven stuff. And, more important, audiences were gravitating to these characters because in the world of Marvel, audience identification was key.

And perhaps no Fantastic Four member was as easy for readers to identify with than Ben Grimm. Black readers saw in Ben someone who was labeled as different because of the color of his skin. He was persecuted for his looks, a metaphor for the experiences of various minorities in this country. Images like the cover of *Fantastic Four* #91, where Ben Grimm is depicted as chained and with a yoke around his neck, reinforce this metaphor; the cover even bears the declaration "The Thing Enslaved!" Jewish readers considered the unassuming, surprisingly sentimental Ben an outsider who was at once like—and unlike—Joe Average. Ben's ethnicity was never touched on during Lee's and Kirby's run on FF, nor was his religious affiliation. However, it's commonly known in comic-book circles that Jack Kirby kept an unpublished drawing of the Thing in full rabbinical garb in his house. And even though Lee claims that he based Ben's mannerisms and dialogue more on the comedian Jimmy Durante than anyone else, the Thing's personality seems suspiciously reminiscient of Kirby himself. Like Kirby, Benjamin Jacob Grimm is a gruff, stocky, cigar-smoking tough guy from New York with a heart of gold. And even his name seems to be a tip-off; Benjamin was Kirby's father's name, and Jacob was Jack Kirby's real first name.

And perhaps as a tribute to Ben Grimm's Jewish creators Lee and Kirby, the writer Karl Kesel (*Daredevil, Superboy*) and the penciler Stuart Immonen (*Adventures of Superman, ShockRockets*) crafted the acclaimed story "Remembrance of Things Past" in *Fantastic Four* #56 (Volume 3), published in August 2002. In this story, we learn that Ben Grimm is indeed Jewish. "I always thought Ben Grimm had to be Jewish anyway, because he was Jack's alter ego," the writer/editor Paul Kupperberg (*Doom Patrol, Checkmate*) said of Kirby. "But when these characters were first created, anti-Semitism was so prevalent, even in

an industry run by Jews. We finally reached a time when you stopped hiding being a Jew." "Remembrance" starts out simply enough. Grimm returns to his childhood neighborhood on the Lower East Side to return a Star of David that he stole as an adolescent from a pawn shop owner named Mr. Sheckerberg. Throughout the Lee/Kirby FF stories, Grimm often visited his childhood stomping grounds, a neighborhood called Yancy Street, which was conspicuously similar to the Lower East Side where Kirby grew up. Whenever he went back home, he was taunted for abandoning his roots as a hoodlum. It was implied that he "sold out," simply by becoming upwardly mobile, a taunt that many upwardly mobile Jews, blacks, Asians, and Latinos would recognize. However, in these 1960s-era stories, Ben Grimm was never identified by his ethnic background or religion; it was just a matter of his "abandoning" his lower-class roots. If anything, this could be seen as a metaphor for anyone of any ethnicity being accused of selling out after "moving on up." In "Remembrance of Things Past," Kesel and Immonen fill in the blanks of Ben Grimm's backstory, providing us with valuable tidbits of psychological insight that explain who Grimm is and how he came to be. We learn that his father was an alcoholic, and his brother Danny was a gang leader who lived fast and died young. Soon, young Ben Grimm was orphaned; he stole the Star of David to prove he had the guts to lead the Yancy Street Gang, but he was saved from a life of gang violence when the city moved him in with his rich uncle.

One reason for Ben Grimm's runaway success is that many readers identify with this lovable lug. After all, sometimes we all feel a little … different.

In the present, Grimm defends the elderly Mr. Sheckerberg from a costumed super-extortionist called Powderkeg. During the Thing's battle with Powderkeg, the Yancy Street Gang swoops in to turn the tide in their old pal's favor, pushing the supervillain down a sewer hole. But before this happens, Powderkeg wounds Sheckerberg. Believing that his old mentor may be fatally wounded, Grimm screams, "Damn! Where's those cops we called? Could be dyin' and I can't do nothin.' No … No. There is one thing. Lessee … Been a while …" He then intones the *Shema,* one of the most sacred Jewish prayers: "Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad … Uhm … Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed." Note that the "… Uhm …" is added in by the writer Kesel, and it's totally in character; Ben Grimm hasn't been to synagogue in years, and clearly his Hebrew is a bit rusty. It turns out that the old pawnbroker is okay, and he asks

In this *Fantastic Four* comic book from 2002, it was revealed that The Thing was actually Jewish. Ben Grimm explains to Sheckerberg that he didn't make this public because he didn't want people to think that all Jews were monsters like him.

A Jack Kirby drawing of Ben Grimm—aka The Thing—wearing a prayer shawl and yarmulke and reading a prayer book. This drawing was made as a lark, and it's doubtful that Kirby intended for Ben Grimm to actually be Jewish. However, years after Kirby's death, a new creative team at Marvel Comics **wrote a story where it is explained that Ben Grimm is Jewish. [Artwork courtesy of Lisa Kirby.]**

Grimm why in all these years the press never mentioned that the Thing is Jewish. Is it possible that he's ashamed of his heritage? Nothing like that, Ben assures him; he just figured that "there's enough trouble in this world without people thinkin' Jews are all monsters like me." Sheckerberg corrects him, saying that not only is he not a monster, he's better than most people. Then he remembers: "Why did you come by, today of all days?" Ben returns the Star of David, but Sheckerberg refuses it, telling him to keep it, to protect it. Ben quips, "This doesn't mean I'm gonna start goin' to temple again." By story's end, when the police cars have finally come to take Powderkeg away, the villain asks Ben, "And you're really Jewish?" Ben snarls, "There a problem with that?" Powderkeg replies, "No! No, it's just … you don't *look* Jewish."

Here, Kesel is not only addressing issues of how Jews are viewed by themselves and the world at large—such as Ben's concerns about the world thinking that "Jews are all monsters like me"—but he's also using one of Stan Lee's dictums: always keep the dialogue true to the characters, no matter the situation. Thanks to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, subsequent writers like Karl Kesel always knew how to write Ben Grimm so that he was consistently "in character." This seems like it would be a no-brainer for writers of any kind. But in the 1960s, comic-book characters were subject to any number of editorial regime changes, and when a new editor took over a title and assigned a new writer to a book, old characters would be written in completely new ways, ways that were completely out of character. Consider the whimsical, mythic *Wonder Woman* stories penned by her creator, William Moulton Marston, during the 1940s, and compare them to the later, more pedestrian *Wonder Woman* stories of the 1950s penned by Robert Kanigher. They truly seem like the adventures of two different women wearing the same costume. Stan Lee's genius lay in creating characters that were easy to understand and relate to on a dramatic level, thus giving future Marvel writers a perfect template for those characters—*This* is how you write Ben Grimm, *this* is how you write Reed Richards …

THE SUPERHERO FROM QUEENS

...And this is how you write Peter Parker. Peter Parker, aka Spider-Man, was another Stan Lee co-creation who quickly climbed the web of great comic-book superheroes to become Marvel's flagship character. Introduced in 1962 in the pages of *Amazing Fantasy* #15 and created by Lee and the artist Steve Ditko, Spider-Man was a first in comic books. He was the first major teenage superhero. In the past, teenagers in comic books were kid sidekicks like Robin (of *Batman* fame), or Andy Hardy-style malt shopdwelling goof-offs like Archie Andrews of *Archie Comics.* Even the few teenaged superheroes in the Golden Age of comics, like DC's Star Spangled Kid, were strictly B-list (and memorably unmemorable), and they often had nothing in common with real-life teens. But in Peter Parker, Lee and Ditko created a teenager who sweated out relationship problems, who didn't always do the right thing, and who didn't always get the girl. At the outset Spider-Man seems like kids' stuff, an ordinary superhero concept. Bitten by a radioactive spider, Peter Parker finds himself with the ability to climb walls and the proportional strength, speed, and agility of a spider. For a science ficiton character, it's pretty shaky on the science. But where *Spider-Man* excelled was as a well-thought-out metaphor for adolescence. Peter Parker becomes a freak, just as many children feel freakish once their bodies surrender to the horror show that is puberty. Peter Parker feels that he's constantly screwing up his relationships with the opposite sex, again something that real-life teens can identify with. When Peter nurses a huge crush on Betty Brant, a secretary at the *Daily Bugle,* the newspaper where he works as a photographer, she doesn't know he exists. By the time they actually start dating, we know it won't last. (A cardinal rule in *Spider-Man:* No relationship ends well.) And indeed it doesn't last. Peter can't open up to Betty because he's leading a double life, so he sits by passively and watches her rebound with another guy. We only know that they still care for each other thanks to Lee's expertly written thought balloons, which communicate their inner turmoil. This isn't Archie Andrews, whose biggest fret is whether to take Betty or Veronica to the sock hop. This is real teen angst, worthy of a James Dean movie. The very idea that Spider-Man can't have a healthy

In the early Spider-man comics, the artist Steve Ditko's quirky, mood-drenched illustrations were balanced by Stan Lee's more grounded and often humorous plots and dialogues.

relationship with a woman because he's a superhero is a masterstroke on the part of Lee and Ditko, laden with psychological subtext and previously unheard of in the superhero fiefdom. Superman, who might as well have been a costumed Archie, often fretted over Lois Lane and Lana Lang (and sometimes mermaid Lori Lemaris), but he never got too worked up over his romantic commitments. And everything resolved itself by the end of each issue. Not so with Spidey, and Steve Ditko furnished the beads of sweat on Peter Parker's furrowed brow that drove home his inner turmoil.

Spider-Man also was an interesting character in that his motive was guilt. When he first discovers his powers in the pages of *Amazing Fantasy* #15, he used them not to fight crime, but to win wrestling matches and do corny wall-crawling tricks for big bucks on TV. He used his powers for celebrity, not the greater good. This is a welcome change from the magnanimous heroic feats displayed by Superman and his ilk, and it's a very Stan Lee touch. With Spider-Man, Lee is saying, "What would you or I do if we had superpowers? Fight crime? Risk our lives? Are you *kidding?* We'd go on TV and make a mint!" But things change when Spider-Man fails to stop a burglar; it just isn't worth his time. That same burglar later murders Spider-Man's beloved Uncle Ben, and at that point Peter Parker undertakes what the mythologist Joseph Campbell called the "hero's journey" and devotes his life to helping the helpless. But the fact that he could have stopped the crook and just didn't feel like it haunts him forever, driving him in his pursuit of the criminal element. Just as in the *Fantastic Four*'s Ben Grimm, here Lee has crafted a realistic hero, full of self-loathing and neurotic angst, the polar opposite of the sort of heroes most comics were offering.
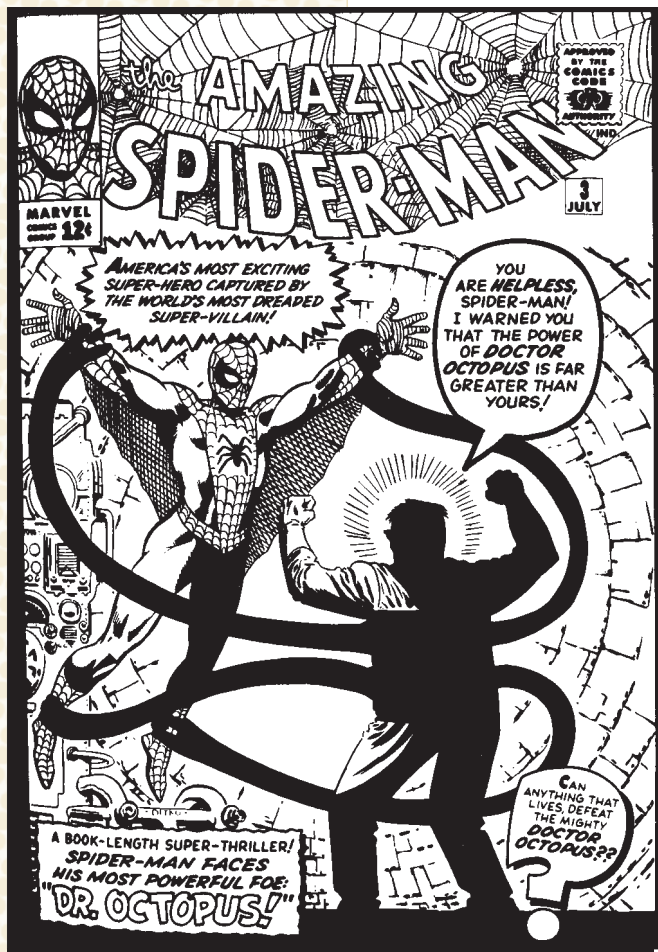
Stan Lee always favored alliterative names like Peter Parker or Reed Richards, and rhyming names like Doc Ock (Dr. Octopus's nickname). Why? They're easier to remember!

Yes, Spider-Man, co-created by the Jewish comics writer/editor Stanley Martin Lieber, is a hero driven by guilt. And Jewish guilt jokes aside, there are many Jewish signifiers in the Peter Parker persona, if one knows where to look. The novelist Michael Chabon, commenting on Parker's guilt-ridden persona in the June 28, 2004, issue of *Newsweek,* said, "I don't think there's another comic book

super-hero that's as completely driven by trying to pay some debt, a debt that can't be paid, as Spider-Man is. For years people have speculated that Peter was sort of crypto-Jewish," and Chabon goes on to point out that Peter Parker lives with Uncle *Ben* and Aunt *May* in *Queens*. The italics are Chabon's; he is insinuating that those aspects of the character—the family members with Old World names, the lower-class, outer borough locale—are subtextual Jewish signifiers. After all, many of the Jewish comics creators from the industry's Golden Age—Stan Lee among them—were born in the outer boroughs of New York to Old World European Jewish parents. Most of the personality traits one stereotypically associated with Jews were ones that Lee and Ditko ascribed to Peter Parker. Parker was bright, studious, and timid, with a love of learning and close ties to his family. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #7, in the story "The Return of the Vulture," Parker is challenged to a game of volleyball by Flash Thompson, the school bully. Suddenly, Parker overhears a radio announcement that the Vulture has escaped from the state prison, and he feigns weakness, saying, "I—I don't feel very well! I'll ask Coach Smith if I may be excused!" Flash taunts him, laughing, "We might have known! A fast game of volleyball is too much for poor puny Parker!" As Parker leaves, complaining of a headache, his thought balloons tell us that he loathes having to put on this weakling act. As he's thinking this, Flash continues to taunt him: "Strange how you always get those 'headaches' whenever something exciting is going on!" Given how Flash pokes fun at Peter, singling him out as physically inferior while nevertheless being suspicious of his every move, it's not too difficult to see Peter as a stand-in for a Jew, and Flash as a stand-in for an anti-Semite or racist of any kind. It's doubtful that this is what Lee and Ditko had in mind; they were just trying to raise the bar and create good comics. However, it is true that in his dealings with Peter Parker, Flash Thompson seems deeply threatened by the physically slight bookworm, for reasons Flash himself doesn't seem to comprehend. Why does he let Parker get to him so much, every time they share a scene together? Stan Lee himself grew up a physically unimpressive Jew who was, like Peter Parker, a voracious reader. It's possible that he too was underestimated and overlooked by his peers, and that he subconsciously put these feelings into the Peter Parker/Flash Thompson dynamic. And intentional or not, the multi-layered relationships found everywhere in Lee's and Ditko's run on Spider-Man made the characters seem more realistic to readers.

Another element of the Marvel Comics written by Stan Lee that made them more attractive to fans was that here for the first time one saw a group of comic-book creators endeavoring to create a
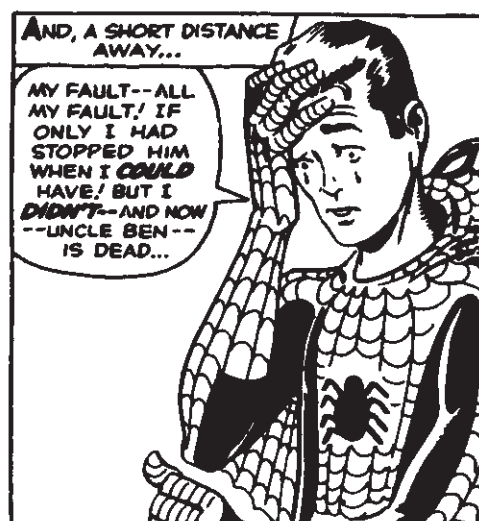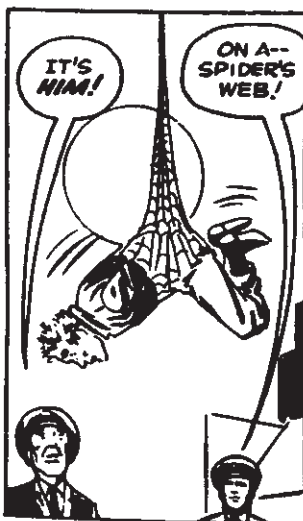
Peter Parker—aka—Spider-man, resonated with audiences because he is the most human of superheroes. He's bespectacled, slight of build, studious, awkward … Hey, those are all Jewish stereotypes!

shared universe. In this case, that shared universe was quickly dubbed the Marvel Universe. A "shared universe" is when characters from one comic-book title appear in another comic-book title, as when, for example, Spider-Man would appear in the pages of *Fantastic Four,* or vice versa. But before Marvel's 1960s heyday, comic-book characters had been appearing in each other's titles for decades. Superman and Batman would often team up, as would so many other superheroes. Having one superhero "guest star" in another character's book was a way to generate extra revenue; after all, if you're a Superman fan but you see this new Batman character who's appearing in Superman's book, maybe you will buy some of Batman's own comics.

Marvel also had characters appear in each other's books for that reason. But what set the Marvel Universe apart was that Lee, Kirby, and company worked out such a rich, dense mythology for their characters that when, say, Spider-Man appeared in the Fantastic Four's comic, it seemed more organic and not just a huckster's ploy to make FF fans buy Spidey's comic books (even if it was that too). Here's the difference: Superman's and

Batman's team-ups were arbitrary. Why would Batman want to work with Superman anyway? Wouldn't there be a personality clash there? Wouldn't the Dark Knight fight with the Man of Steel, that big blue boy scout? The DC writers and editors seemed content to ignore all such character-based squabbles. Stan Lee, however, reveled in them. When Spider-Man shows up at the Baxter Building (the FF's headquarters) in *Fantastic Four Annual* #1, he attempts a break-in, is foiled by the Thing, and then, after a prolonged fight sequence, the entire FF bring his web-slinging antics to a halt before asking what he's doing there in the first place. Spidey matter-of-factly answers, "I want to join the Fantastic Four, so I thought I'd give you a demonstration of what I can do!" He then inquires about how much the "job" pays, and Sue has to explain to him that the Fantastic Four is a non-profit organization. Keep in mind that at this point in the early 1960s, Spider-Man wasn't yet acknowledged as a hero by the other Marvel characters; he was still thought of as a mysterious vigilante, possibly even a criminal, on the run from the law. So the

FF naturally asks Spidey, "Besides, aren't you wanted by the police? This isn't 'outlaws anonymous'!" With that, Spider-Man sniffs, "I might have known! You're just like all the rest! Ready to believe the worst of anyone!" They yell for him to come back, but it's too late. He swings out the window and out of their lives. Same old Spider-Man: strapped for cash, neurotic, not the best social skills in the world. Stan Lee wrote him here the exact same way he would be written in his own comic book, and just because he shows up in the FF's book doesn't mean that he has to slap a grin on his forlorn mug and join them on some world-saving quest. In fact, it's rather refreshing to see superheroes appear in each other's books and not team up. Think about it: in this *FF Annual* story, the titular superhero team fight with a fellow hero, learn he was interested in a job with them, and then yell at him to get out before thinking twice of their actions. These are real people, flawed as can be, and they stay in character even if they appear in someone else's book. That's what made the Marvel Universe a true shared universe. And as the creators of this shared universe, Lee and company were respecting their audience's intelligence.

Stan Lee's

Marvel Comics of the 1960s were also distinct because they were written for a wider audience demographic than most comic books. During World War II, GIs sometimes read comics as an escapist reminder of life back home, but now for the first time comic books went out of their way to court high school and college students as well as young kids. Teenagers racked with adolescent neuroses and identity issues identified heavily with characters like Spider-Man and the X-Men, seeing the characters' struggles as reflections of their own inner turmoil. Chapters of the Marvel fan organization the Merry Marvel Marching Society were started at Ivy League schools such as Princeton.

Stan Lee didn't really plan it that way. It just so happened that by the mid-1960s, Marvel Comics were becoming a big hit on college campuses, and he decided to embrace this new audience. Lee started to become a fixture on the college lecture circuit. He was always reliable for a quote whenever reporters came calling, and his easygoing charm assured him a position as Marvel's public face. Lee's unique status as the Walt Disney of Marvel would cause considerable controversy in later years, when both Kirby and Ditko contested the party line that Lee was the sole architect of the Marvel Universe. But that was a long way off, and in the mid-1960s Marvel's status as a hit factory caused the Marvel Universe to expand with ever-increasing frequency.

The growth of Marvel as a line of comics that skewed older also allowed Lee and Kirby to delve into more philosophical, spiritual, and overtly Jewish themes. The Silver Surfer, who debuted in *Fantastic Four* #48 in 1966, is the herald for Galactus, a gigantic energy-imbibing alien who consumes whole planets for sustenance. In a three-part story arc that begins in the pages of *FF* #48, the Silver Surfer zooms through the
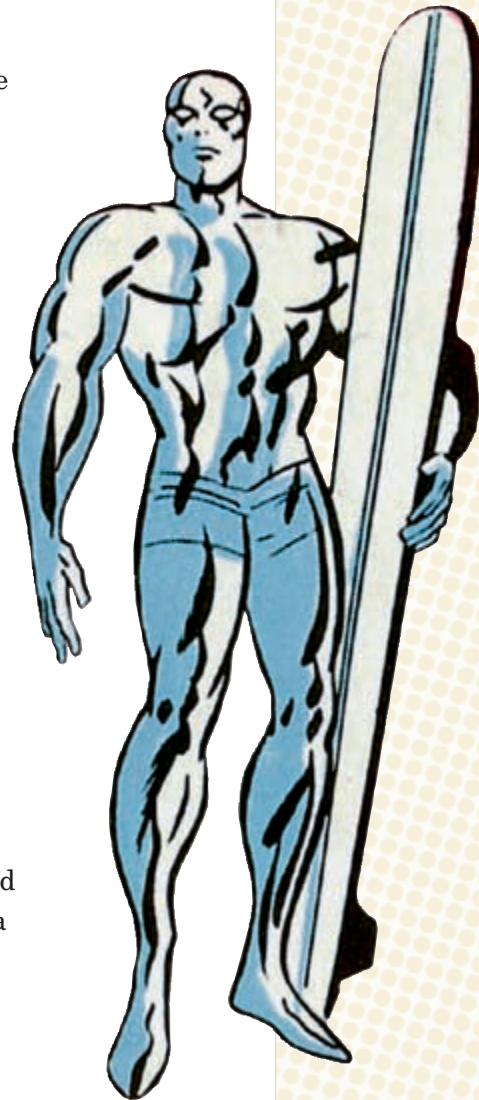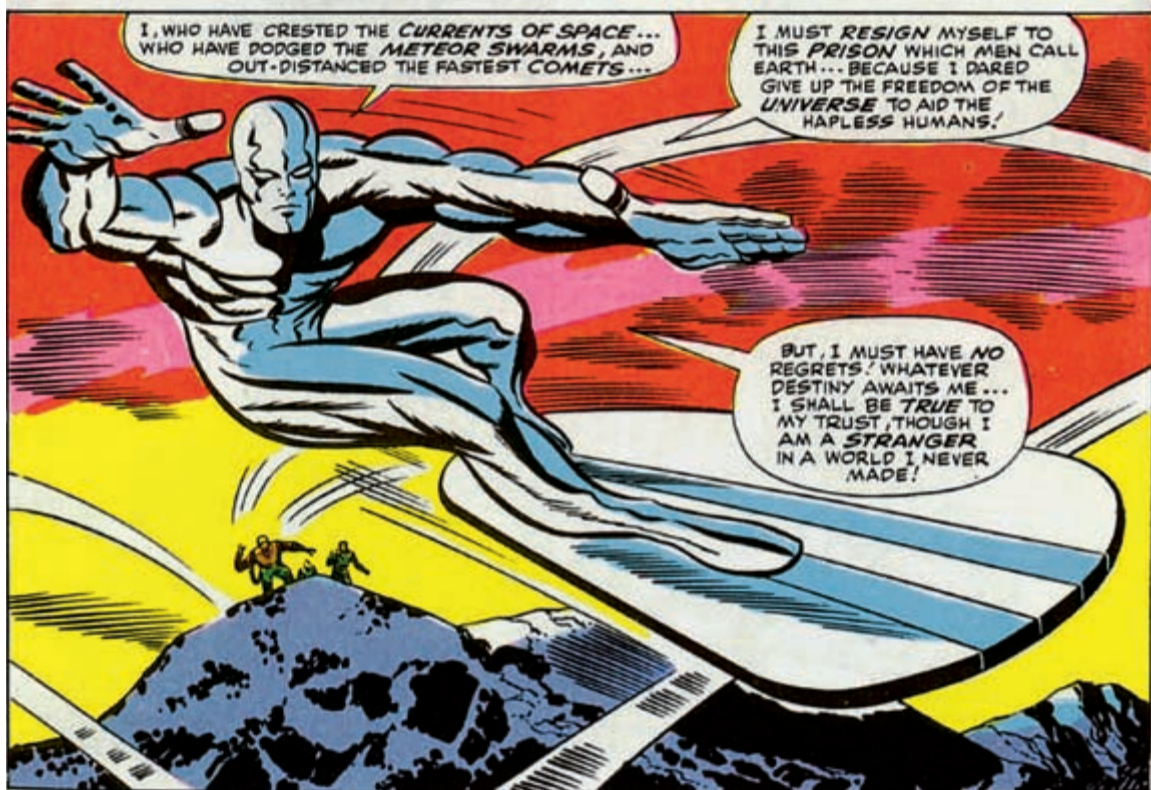
Stan Lee used the Silver Surfer character to voice his own concerns about what we're doing to our troubled planet.

galaxy, scouting planets for his master to consume. He has picked Earth to be his master's newest target, but once spending time here, the Surfer begins to feel remorse for Earthlings and begs his master to look elsewhere for sustenance. As Lee himself recounts, many scholars and theologians have read varied meanings into the story of the Silver Surfer. "A lot of people felt he was my version of the second coming of Christ!" he laughs. However far-fetched this may sound, the nondenominational yet spiritual subtext of the character was intentional on Lee's part. He thought of the character as part spiritual fable, part ecological morality tale, and he stresses that the story has a biblical subtext as well. "The attitude I wanted him to have was, people are so blind, we don't realize we're living on the most perfect planet possible," Lee said. "It has wonderful weather, we have all the water we need, and we can grow all the food we need. There's grass and trees and flowers and animals. We live in the garden of Eden. And instead of enjoying it, we spend all of our time hating people who are different than we are! And being greedy and avaricious, and committing crimes. I felt that if somebody from another planet came down and saw the human race, what would he think? What would he feel about us? And that's what I tried to do with the Silver Surfer." The Silver Surfer's late-1960s timing was perfect, as the character was embraced by the burgeoning hippie counterculture as a symbol of environmentalist and pacifist philosophy.

Stan Lee and his artistic collaborators were using the genre of superheroes as a means to make a statement about humankind. With the Silver Surfer, Lee and Kirby were saying something positive about man's potential for greatness. But with other characters like the Incredible Hulk, they were talking about the darker side of human nature. The Hulk, who debuted in the pages of *The Incredible Hulk* #1 in May 1962, was a monster. But unlike Ben Grimm, this monster wasn't a lovable softie with a heart of gold. This was an unpredictable berserker who would explode into fits of rage. The backstory is simple: After the scientist Bruce Banner is accidentally bombarded by gamma rays, he transforms periodically into a giant green monster (though in the character's first appearance, he is gray). Aside from being a metaphor for the monster that rages inside all of us, the Hulk is a modern version of an old Jewish myth. "When you think about it, he is [a Golem]," noted Stan Lee. Like the Hulk, the Golem is primarily a protector of the people, but he also has the capacity to become a menace and a danger to those around him. "Once you see the Hulk, he does seem to be like you'd imagine the Golem would have been [in modern times]. But what I was thinking of [at the time] was the Frankenstein Monster. When I saw the

Frankenstein movie with Boris Karloff, I always thought that the monster was the good guy. He didn't really want to hurt anybody, you know? And those idiots with torches were always chasing him up and down the hills; they didn't give him any peace. And I thought, 'Gee, it would be kind of interesting to get somebody who's sort of a monster, but he's a good guy, but nobody knows it, and people are always hunting him, and hounding him!' And then I thought it would be even more interesting to do it like Jekyll and Hyde, let him change from a normal person into the monster. So that was really on my mind." And even though Lee claims that he was inspired more by Frankenstein's monster than the Golem when dreaming up the Hulk, many literary critics now believe that Mary Shelley herself used the Golem as her inspiration when dreaming up Frankenstein. So the Hulk *is* the Golem … once removed.

An irradiated monster, the Hulk was Stan Lee's and Jack Kirby's answer to nuclear paranoia then gripping the nation—a modern-day version of the Golem of Prague.

THE HULK: © 2007 Marvel Characters Inc. Used with permission.

OUTSIDER HEROES

In September of 1963, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the X-Men, a group of men and women who are born with a mutant gene that gives them each a different superpower. The X-Men would become Marvel's most potent metaphor for the human condition. Lee maintains that the inspiration for the mutants came from "laziness." "It was just laziness," he laughs. "With all the other characters, the Fantastic Four got their powers from cosmic rays, the Hulk got his power from gamma rays, Spider-Man was bitten by a radioactive spider …. I was running out of rays, and insects to bite people! And I realized I wanted to do a lot more heroes and I thought, well, if I just say that people are mutants, you know, mutations exist in nature, and they exist in fruit and animals and people, so I'll just say a lot of people who were born that way. And then I don't have to dream up gamma rays, or radioactive spiders, and it made it very easy for me. So it was just laziness."

The 1964 storyline featuring the Sentinels marked the first time that the X-Men were used as a metaphor for racism. It wouldn't be the last.

In the world of the X-Men, mutants' powers begin manifesting themselves at puberty. With these characters portrayed as teenagers, they served as a profound metaphor for puberty itself. After all, as the legendary *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont said, "To me, the purpose [the X-Men] serve, is you take a kid in their adolescence. Everything is in flux, physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, they're trying to build a coherent view of themselves in the world, except the rules are changing every day! Your voice is breaking, your body is growing, you're being swept by hormones, and impulses, and questions! You're being required to make choices and decisions that will affect the rest of your life, but you've got nothing to go on, because you're only like 14, for God's sake!" Jon Bogadnove agrees: "The X-Men are a metaphor for puberty, in that kids are perfectly normal until they reach puberty, and then these strange traits, and their true identity, these powers and abilities take hold, and it makes them outcasts in society." What better metaphor for all this than a mutant?

The idea smacks not only of Lee's influence—his other Marvel characters like Spider-Man and the Thing were often a metaphor for

outsiders, teens, and minorities—but also Kirby's as well. The X-Men started out as a superhero team with five characters: the leader, Charles Xavier, aka Professor X, who has supreme telepathic powers; Angel, aka Warren Worthington III, who flies with the aid of huge birdlike wings; Hank McCoy, the Beast, who has the strength and agility of an animal; Scott Summers, whose eyes release dangerous optic blasts; and Jean Grey, a gifted telepath and protégé under Professor X. In fact, all five are students of the professor, and they all live and study at his "School for Gifted Youngsters" in Westchester, New York.

And this is where Jack Kirby's influence stands out most clearly. Kirby was perhaps best known for being a "world-builder," able to create whole universes of characters and ideas with remarkable ease. His influence can be seen in other characters like the Fantastic Four, which resemble his 1950s-era DC characters the Challengers of the Unknown, and the FF supporting character Silver Surfer, which Lee admits was mostly Kirby's idea. Considering that Lee's and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* was responsible for more spin-off characters than any other Marvel title of the 1960s—FF characters from this era include such Marvel mainstays as the Black Panther, Galactus, the Watcher, the Inhumans, the Skrulls, the Kree, and Wyatt Wingfoot—Kirby is as responsible as Lee for what we know today as Marvel Comics. And of course there's the fact that Captain America, the most durable Golden Age character from Marvel's "Timely Comics" era, was a Kirby co-creation. In fact, if there's any one person who could be credited as Lee's co-pilot in charting the Marvel Universe, it's Kirby, who co-created nearly every Marvel superhero during the 1960s. His story ideas and visual concepts were instrumental in the development of such famed Lee-Kirby creations as Thor, the Hulk, and Nick Fury, just to name a few. Even the few characters that he didn't co-create, like Spider-Man and Daredevil, benefited from the Kirby touch; he penciled the cover art for Spidey's first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, and he created the first concept sketches for the "Man Without Fear" known as Daredevil (which he then handed off to the artist Bill Everett). And throughout the 1960s other artists like the Iron Man artist Don Heck and the Silver Surfer illustrator John Buscema used Kirby's artwork as the basis for the Marvel house style.

Kirby's flair for invention found a welcome home in the *X-Men.* After all, if there were a whole generation of mutants, each with a different superpower, Kirby's imagination could run wild. Over the years, Kirby and his successors fashioned literally scores of mutants of any conceivable shape and ability. Like John Broome's and Gil Kane's

Green Lantern Corps, the *X-Men* was a great vehicle for a gifted artist's imagination to roam free. But Lee and Kirby realized that not only was *X-Men* a resonant metaphor for adolescence, but it was also an allegory for prejudice. As society hated and feared them for being innately different than everyone else, the X-Men are a metaphor for the ethnic "other" (African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Jews, Muslims, and homosexuals, among others). But Lee and Kirby had just scratched the surface themselves since they rarely employed the "mutant as minority" metaphor. That metaphor that would be more often employed by later X-scribes like Len Wein and Chris Claremont.

Nevertheless, looking at the Lee and Kirby *X-Men* stories (the two collaborated on only the first 17 issues, after which Lee only hung around for two more installments), one instantly notices that the "mutant as minority" angle was already fairly well realized. In *X-Men* #14, the paranoid anthropologist Bolivar Trask declares, "Mutants walk among us! Hidden! Unknown! Waiting—! Waiting for their moment to strike!" This sentiment sets off an ambitious three-part story arc in which the idea of mutants as a persecuted minority is first explored in real detail. While the X-Men are on vacation, Dr. Trask has created an army of giant killer robots called Sentinels, which are programmed to detect and hunt down persons with mutant DNA. Professor Xavier instigates a televised debate with Dr. Trask, who has used the debate to show off his Sentinels to the general public. The Sentinels go berserk and attack both mutants *and* humans (including Dr. Trask) after they deduce that for them to protect humans they have to rule them as well. The X-Men are called back from vacation to stop the Sentinels and win back the public's trust, their good name having been besmirched by Dr. Trask.

The Black Panther was a hero to many young black kids, reinforcing Marvel's status as *the* progressive comics publisher of the 1960s.

The Sentinels work as a metaphor for everything from Nazi stormtroopers to Klansmen to rabid McCarthyites. In the 1960s, with civil rights workers and anti-war protestors the victims of hate crimes on a regular basis, it seems particularly apt that Lee and Kirby created not only a metaphor for the downtrodden (the X-Men)

but a metaphor for their persecutors (the Sentinels). "I was just trying to make [my comics] contemporary, trying to make them as hip as I could," Lee explained. "And whatever people were thinking about and talking about and arguing about at the time, whenever I could, without being heavy-handed about it, I tried to insert some of that in the stories." Jon Bogdanove agrees, adding that sometimes superhero comic books are a metaphor for real-life events whether their creators realize it or not. "In one sense," he remarked, "when you look at comics, it's pretty hard to deny that everything in comics is a hyperbolic metaphor, just like everything in myths are a hyperbolic metaphor. So it's pretty impossible to deny that fact. Yet, in the creation of it, in the majority of cases, it's not consciously being designed as a metaphor. In the majority of cases, it's being designed as a story that's interesting. *But why is it interesting to the creators??* It's interesting to the creator because it's a parable for something real to them!"

The Black Panther was the first major black superhero and one of the new wave of black characters ushered in by Marvel Comics during the 1960s.

Stan Lee, a strong opponent of prejudice, was instrumental in bringing more African American characters into comic books, including the Black Panther (the first major black superhero in comic books); Captain America's partner the Falcon; and Peter Parker's mentor Joe "Robbie" Robertson. Thanks to minority characters like these—and others, like the Native American Wyatt Wingfoot—Marvel had the most diverse dramatis personae of any comic-book company during the 1960s. It may seem conspicuous, then, that Lee and Kirby never used the X-Men as a metaphor for anti-Semitism in particular. As latter-day cartoonists like Bogdanove have noted, however, Lee and Kirby may not have even been aware of the Jewish metaphors that the *X-Men* and their other comics were sending out at the time. "It's possible, if you're a genius like Jack Kirby, to end up tapping into some kind of Jungian thing," observed Bogdanove, "and putting out all kinds of archetypes—and mythic metaphors—that really you might not be aware of, or no one will be aware of until retrospect and reexamination a generation later. And although [comic books] were the lowest rung in the illustration ladder, a volume business and all that sort of stuff, we wouldn't be thinking of these things as great if they didn't trigger something, if something in those stories didn't trigger something deep and real." The comic book certainly triggered

something deep and real on college campuses.The pacifist Professor X's battle against the warmongering mutant Magneto—angry at humanity for treating him as different for being a mutant—was seen as a metaphor for Dr. Martin Luther King's ideological arguments with the militant activist Malcolm X. In the decade to come, after Lee left the writing of *X-Men* to others, one of those other writers would take Magneto on a more personal and more openly Jewish journey than ever before, leaving all talk of metaphor behind.

OPENLY JEWISH, OPENLY HEROIC

Chris Claremont was born in London in 1950, but he grew up in the United States nourished by the uniquely American tales of heroism and villainy only the U.S. comic-book industry could provide. Starting in January 1969, Claremont spent a few months as a gofer at Marvel Comics. Directly after his stint there, he went on a trip to Israel to live on a kibbutz for two months. "When I was in college," he said, "the school closed down for two months between fall and spring semesters. The idea was that you'd go out in January and February and get a job in your major field. An internship. So my major fields in college at that time were political theory and acting. And I discovered my sophomore year of school that there was a program called Kibbutz Aliya. Which is basically upper middle class migrant workers. And you sign up with them, you ship out to Israel, you spend 2 or 6 months working on a kibbutz. And it was run by a guy named Zvi Zexer, out of an office that was on Union Square and Park. Now it's a clothing store, but it was on the fifth or sixth floor, Kibbutz Aliya, and he published a newsletter called *Confessions of a Zionist Imperialist Israeli,* where he would overuse irony to explain why they were good guys. So I went in there to apply, and he was looking at me very seriously, and he sees [my] blond [hair], blue eyes, and he says in a very thick Israeli accent, 'You must understand, Mr. Claremont, we have a quota for non-Jews.' Emphasis on 'Jews.' So I said, 'Well, you know, would it help [if I told you that] my mother's Jewish?' He said, 'What do you mean? Your name is Claremont!' So I said, 'Yeah, but *her* name is Pashkowvietsky.' He says, 'Ah! Brother! Landsman!' Not only is my mother's family Jewish, evidently according to family legend, I'm six or seven generations removed from a grand rabbi. Who must be spinning in his grave at the heathen I've become. So the next thing I knew, I was on a plane to Paris and then to Tel Aviv, and working on a kibbutz out in southern Hebron. The kibbutz was called Nativ Halamed Hey, about three kilometers from the old green-line, just north of Hebron. Which was as exciting in 1970 as it is today, but for totally different reasons. It was very much a battle zone, it was an

official battle zone. Because there still wasn't any peace with Jordan. There wasn't a day that went by that you didn't see the Air Force flying Phantoms into Jordan, or have Army patrols. And the kibbutz had three armed guards a night, patrolling the perimeter. And for someone who was in college in the middle of the Vietnam War, [it was] a totally different experience."

The experience was a transformative one. "In this kibbutz were survivors of the Holocaust, of the Shoah," he said. "And when I was there, we would have weekends, and it was a very socialist kibbutz. It wasn't religious at all, it was totally secular. But on weekends, they would show movies. And one weekend, for reasons that escape all understanding on my part, they showed *Judgment at Nuremberg*. You wouldn't think it would be the best movie for that sort of thing. But there is a five- or ten-minute sequence in the middle of it, where the prosecuting character, [played by] Richard Widmark, shows documentary footage of the liberation of Dachau. And I remember [we were] in the dining hall, and it was the first time in my life that I ever understood the concept of silence as an active force. It wasn't just the absence of sound, it was all the sound in the room being sucked away. Emotionally. Because, as with the last scene of *Schindler's List,* where you're sitting there watching the movie for three hours, safe in the artifice that this is a movie, that these are actors, it's all special effects, that no matter what Spielberg is doing, you're safe because it's all make-believe. But the minute you get that last scene with the survivors, and the surviving members of the principal cast walking by Oskar Schindler's grave, and putting the stones down, … I mean, I was shattered watching it. I couldn't stop crying for about 10 minutes. Because the fourth wall is gone. You then have to sit there and realize that everything you have seen happened to these real people. And that you have to accept the reality that what you saw is just a pale reflection of what must have been. Because … we know how it ended. When it happened for them, they didn't. And that moment in Israel was sort of epiphanic, in the sense of, 'How can you try to convey that?' You know, is there any way to try to convey that—from my own limited experience—to my audience?"

By 1974, Claremont was back working at Marvel. Now he was no mere gofer; he was an associate editor, assisting the Jewish comics pro Len Wein, who was writing and editing the newly relaunched *X-Men* title. The decision to revive *X-Men* was a curious move on Marvel's part, since the series hadn't done well in its original run … or had it? "The original *X-Men* series was canceled in 1970," Claremont remembered. "But in those days, we didn't get final sales

THE X-MEN: © 2007 Marvel Characters Inc. Used with permission.

X-Men was the most openly Jewish super-hero comic book of the 1970s, featuring an arch-enemy, Magneto, who was a Holocaust survivor. These panels are from *X-Men* #3 by Chris Claremont, Jim Lee, and Scott Willaims.

figures until nine months after the books saw print! So about six months later, it began to dawn on Marvel that the book was selling a lot better than they'd thought! The sales trend was *up* when they'd canceled it. So they brought it back as a reprint series for about five years. They would try out the characters in various other books to see if they'd gel, if there was any other interest. In 1974, they decided to give the book a second chance. In an attempt to broaden Marvel's appeal overseas, for foreign licensing opportunities, part of the decision was to internationalize the team." In their attempt to "internationalize" the X-Men, Len Wein and the artist Dave Cockrum created new mutants, ones who weren't as whitebread as their Lee/Kirby predecessors. They included Storm, who hailed from Kenya; Thunderbird, who was Native American; Nightcrawler, who was German; and Colossus, who was Russian. These new X-Men all made their first appearance in May 1975, in the pages of *Giant-Size X-Men* #1. "The assignment was sort of a collaborative venture between Roy Thomas, the editor in chief at the time, [who] sort of gave it the go-ahead," Claremont noted. "Then he handed off the editorial reins to Len Wein, who was [the new] editor-in-chief, who was working with Dave Cockrum. [Dave] was a very hot artist at that point, based on his work at DC on *Legion of Super-Heroes.* And they put together the new *X-Men* series." After the *Giant-Size X-Men* special issue, the regular *X-Men* series was rebooted in August 1975 with *Uncanny X-Men* #94, continuing the numbering of the original series' run as though it had never been canceled.

Len Wein wrote the first few stories chronicling the adventures of this new X-Men team, which still featured Professor X and Cyclops

but was augmented by previously established characters like Banshee (who was Irish); Sunfire (Japanese); and a Canadian character, Wolverine (created by Wein, John Romita, Sr., and Herb Trimpe), who was poised to become Marvel's breakout character of the 1970s. This new supergroupd of X-Men was truly multicultural. But after a brief stint on *X-Men,* Wein handed the scripting reins over to Claremont. Back then it was just another job. "The new *X-Men* was going to be [re]launched as a quarterly series," Claremont recalled. "And it would be like doing a series of *Columbo* movies a year, rather than launch him as a weekly series. But by the time the first issue got into print, the publishing model had changed. So they switched it from a quarterly to a regular periodical. And in the *X-Men*'s case, it came out every other month, because they didn't think it could be produced on a monthly basis, given the creators involved. But at that point, Len had decided to retire as editor-in-chief; the workload he assumed upon retirement didn't allow him time to do *X-Men.* So I was his assistant, the associate editor at the time, on staff. He asked if I'd be interested. Fool that I was, I said, 'Hell yes!'" Little did he know that he would be the characters' primary custodian from 1976 until 1991, the single person responsible for reworking the then-second-string *X-Men* title into the hit series it is today.

Under Claremont's stewardship, the X-Men finally found their footing. Previously Lee and Kirby had used the characters as a metaphor for minorities, as in the story arc that introduced the Sentinels, but thanks to Wein and Cockrum, they *were* actual ethnic minorities. And Claremont's scripts illuminated the metaphors that were always inherent in the concept. In his stories, such as the now-classic "God Loves, Man Kills" story arc, in which a preacher advocates anti-mutant prejudice, Claremont used the X-Men to discuss racism in a more nervy way than either Wein or Lee had ever imagined. Indeed, many of the story elements that one associates with the *X-Men* comic books (and the three *X-Men* feature films) are of Claremont's coinage, such as the love triangle between Wolverine, Jean Grey, and Cyclops; the co-creation of characters like Rogue and Mystique; and the development of a new backstory for Magneto, which revealed that the X-Men's archfoe was Jewish. Not only that, Magneto was a Holocaust survivor, as revealed by the Claremont-scripted *Uncanny X-Men #104* in April 1977. As part of a bold strategy to make the characters more three-dimensional, Claremont decided to weave real-world historical events into their world: "Bear in mind that when I started we were in the mid-70s. So at that point you backtrack everything, and it was plausible that Reed Richards and Ben Grimm could be World War II vets [and that] Charles Xavier

had been in the Korean War. I reworked [the characters' backstory] so that now, mutants grew out of the nuclear tests of the '40s and '50s and '60s. In backtracking 25 years, to when Xavier and Magneto may have come together, I was trying to figure out what made Magneto tick. And I thought, 'What was the most transfiguring event of our century?' In terms that are related to the whole super-concept of the X-Men, of outcasts, and persecution. And I thought, 'Okay! It *has* to be the Holocaust!'"

By making Magneto a Holocaust survivor who is convinced that people are no damn good, Claremont now had a villain with a fascinatingly complex motive: "And once I sort of found that point of departure for him, the rest of it all fell into place. Because it allowed me to turn him into a tragic figure, in that his goals were totally admirable. He wants to save his people! His methodology was defined by all that had happened to him. When I can start from the premise that he was a good and decent man at heart, I then have the opportunity over the course of 200 issues to attempt to redeem him. To take him back within himself to the point where he was that good and decent man, and see if he could start over, and see if he could evolve, in the way that Menachem Begin evolved from a guy that the British considered 'Shoot on sight' in 1945—you know, 'You see him, you kill him! Don't bother about a trial'—to a statesman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978 for the Camp David accords."

Claremont also brought new strong female characters into the series. In *Uncanny X-Men* #129 (January 1979), he and the artist John Byrne created Katherine "Kitty" Pryde, aka Shadowcat, a young Jewish girl who possesses the mutant ability to walk through walls. The creation of Kitty Pryde partially arose out of Claremont's need to see more strong female characters in the X-Men, an element sorely lacking in such a male-dominated group title. "I just started writing women and girls like the ones that I knew," he shrugged. A young woman he saw during his adolescent trip to Israel inspired him to create in Kitty Pryde, a character slight of build yet in possession of great power. "[In 1969], I was walking down the street in Tel Aviv, and bumped into this cute *babe*," he recalled. "You know, [she had] great legs, little ankle socks, mini-skirt, and it's only after you blink

SOME OF **CHRIS CLAREMONT'S** OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE **X-MEN** MYTHOS INCLUDE THE CO-CREATION OF CHARACTERS LIKE PSYLOCKE, FORGE, EMMA FROST, JUBILEE, GAMBIT, SENATOR ROBERT KELLY, AND SABRETOOTH; JEAN GREY'S TRANSFORMATION INTO THE "DARK PHOENIX"; AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPIN-OFF TITLES SUCH AS NEW MUTANTS, EXCALIBUR, AND WOLVERINE.

The first major Jewish female superhero in comic books, Kitty Pryde, is what the X-Men are all about: being treated like an outcast and overcoming it. In this comic book, Kitty Pride is speaking at a special reception given at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

your eyes that you realize it's a *uniform* mini-skirt, and she's wearing an IDF [Israel Defense Forces] parka, and by the way, *she's got an Uzi!* 'Cute babe, miniskirt, and Uzi' kind of defined my writing career from then on!"

What made Claremont feel it was a necessity to have a teenager in the X-Men, and a Jewish one at that? For one thing, the original team members like Cyclops were all now grown up, and they needed a younger character. Also, as opposed to black characters like Storm or Russian characters like Colossus, Kitty Pryde was a character with whom he could more readily identify. "I had no easy way to relate to the black experience," he said. "The two things I have going for me are I am an immigrant [from England], so I know what it's like to grow up in a country that's not my own. And from a cultural point of view, certainly through my family, I know what it's like to be Jewish! So that became my window through which I could present the youth question, the X-Men universe to a broader audience in terms they could readily and continuously understand. And the idea's always been [that] no matter how extreme the adventures—whether you're in outer space, or dealing with guys who teleport through walls, or in this case a girl who walks through walls—the necessity is to try and find a way to convey that experience and that character in terms that the audience can recognize. If I can do that, if I can do that and have a reader look at this and say, 'I know that character, I know that conversation, I know how they feel on that level as human beings,' then you can embrace the greater story and the greater themes, and not be thrown by the fact that let's face it, we're reading about people who are fighting bug-eyed monsters."

During Claremont's run on *X-Men,* Kitty Pryde was one of the most popular characters, as well as the dream girl for the comic book's millions of adolescent male fans. And Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, has repeatedly referenced Kitty Pryde as the inspiration for Buffy Summers. Clearly, she's had an impact on popular culture, and she did it while being overtly Jewish. Kitty could often be seen wearing a Star of David pendant around her neck, and in 1982's *Uncanny X-Men* #159, her faith in Judaism actually allows her to repel a vampire using the Star (as a Christian would use a cross). In a more somber moment in November 1985's *Uncanny X-Men* #199, Kitty and Magneto bond over their shared Jewish heritage. At that point in the *X-Men* mythos, Magneto had temporarily given up his life of crime and was actually running Professor X's school in the latter's absence. In this particular issue, Magneto accompanies Kitty to the National

Joe Kubert

Holocaust Memorial in Washington, along with their ally Lee Forrester, really the shapeshifting mutant Mystique. Commenting on the Holocaust, Mystique says, "Man's inhumanity to man … how easily the race kills." Magneto responds, "Then, Lee, it was the Jews. My nightmare has ever been that tomorrow it will be Mutants." Kitty is speaking at the remembrance day event on behalf of her deceased grandfather, Samuel Prydeman, whose sister (Kitty's great-aunt) Chava lived in Warsaw before the war. Magneto asks Kitty if she has a picture of Chava, because it so happens that he knew a "Chava Rosanoff" in Auschwitz. Two elderly people—Ruth and David Schulman—overhear this exchange and run over to Magneto, amazed to see their old friend looking so young and virile. It turns out that Magneto saved the Schulmans' lives after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (they were in the resistance) and their deportation to Auschwitz. They too knew a woman named Chava Rosanoff, and it's confirmed that she is the same Chava that Kitty was inquiring about. Kitty asks, "You were a hero?" Magneto's humble reply: "Hardly. In those days, heroism meant holding onto one's humanity while the Nazis tried their best to turn us into animals." Magneto goes on to say that if he is a hero, then so is every other man and woman who survived. At this point, Mystique sheds her façade and a superpowered smackdown ensues. Magneto wraps steel girders around Mystique, "outing" himself as a mutant in the process. It turns out that Mystique has been retained by a government agent to capture Magneto and have him stand trial for his past crimes. Technically, she's one of the good guys. The amassed Holocaust survivors huddle in a corner, terrified that one of their own is a "mutie" and frightened that he will hurt them. A skirmish ensues between the X-Men and Mystique's fellow superpowered agents, but just when the dust settles and Magneto's friends enable him to go free, he decides to let Mystique handcuff him, explaining, "You did not see the faces of my friends when they saw me reveal my powers. They were terrified—as my wife, Magda, was so many years ago. My powers saved our lives—yet, she was more afraid of them, and me, than of the secret police butchers who murdered our daughter … Think what I have done to the world. I ask myself, is Mystique right? Have I become the image of those I hated?" And with that, Mystique slaps the cuffs on him. Here we see Magneto at his most vulnerable; this is what made Chris Claremont's run on *Uncanny X-Men* so memorable. And it's also one of the first sustained efforts to work openly Jewish characters into an established superhero book.

Meanwhile at DC, the artist Joe Kubert and the writer Robert Kanigher had been working together regularly since the 1950s, when they had created the character Sgt. Rock for the war title *Our Army*

Joe Kubert's and Bob Kanigher's character Ragman was among the first wave of Jewish superheroes to hit the comic book industry in the 1970s.

More recent comic-book writers have focused even more on Ragman's Jewish origins, revealing the character to be a modern-day version of the mythical Golem.

at War. Sgt. Rock battled Nazis, but there was nothing Jewish about him. Not so with Ragman, aka rag shop owner Rory Regan, a character Kanigher and Kubert created in 1976. A Batman-style vigilante who operated out of Gotham City and wore a dilapidated costume made of the rags from the junk shop he shared with his dad, Ragman first appeared in five issues of his own short-lived series in 1976–77. Appropriately enough for a character dressed in rags, Ragman fought crime in the ghetto, and his targets were often average gangsters and hoods rather than supervillains. This gave Ragman the air of a social crusader, not unlike Siegel's and Shuster's early Superman stories. The decision to make the character Jewish was a mutual one. "We created him with a Jewish heritage, although we didn't make a big to-do about it," said Kubert. "The story's about a young guy, Rory Regan, whose father has a junk shop, literally a garbage place. And [Rory] befriends certain characters with inordinate abilities, not superpowers, but inordinate abilities that he's able to acquire and develop into this Ragman character. He avenges his father's death at first, because gangsters had gone after him. And his costume was made up of different rags and tatters. We called him the 'Tatterdemalion of Crime.'" But in this series, Ragman's Judaism wasn't really explored; and the series was canceled before anything of substance could be explored about the character. However, by the 1990s a new generation of comics creators were on the rise, some of whom grew up reading about the "Tatterdemalion of Crime."

Three of them—the artist/writer Keith Giffen, the writer Robert Loren Fleming, and the artist Pat Broderick—teamed up to create a new eight-part *Ragman* miniseries in 1991–92. As with Claremont's treatment of Magneto, here Giffen and Fleming reworked Ragman's backstory somewhat. Originally, Kubert and Kanigher created the rag suit to be just that, a suit of patched together rags. The "inordinate abilities" Kubert mentioned were Rory Regan's fighting

prowess, but that's something that anyone with a gym membership and a little discipline can accumulate. His inordinate abilities didn't come from the wearing of his suit.

It was a different story in Giffen's and Fleming's refashioning of the Ragman mythology. In their miniseries, Ragman's suit was no mere garment; each of the patches housed the soul of a different evildoer that Ragman had punished and absorbed. But when the evil souls began to get restless and freed themselves from their patchwork prisons, Ragman has to figure out how to use the Ragman suit properly. With this in mind, he serves as the apprentice to Rabbi Luria, who helps him in his quest. In the first issue of the miniseries, Rory has nightmares that he's in the Warsaw Ghetto and that he has the word "EMET" (Hebrew for truth) on his forehead. According to Jewish legend, this is the word written on the forehead of the Golem. The rabbi tells Rory about the story of the Golem, and that a real Golem had been created using rags to be worn by a human vessel. There had been a Ragman for every generation; the latest was Rory's father, Gerry Regan, whose real name was Jerzy Reganiewicz. Jerzy tried to protect his fellow Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, but fire was the Ragman's weakness, and he was defeated. As the rabbi explains to Rory, referring to the Warsaw Ghetto, "It is a Ragman's duty to protect his people and to inspire hope … but there was no hope left in that place." Like Superman and the Hulk, Ragman is a unique spin on the Golem legend (later in the miniseries, Ragman does battle an *actual* Golem), even if Kubert and Kanigher hadn't originally designed him with this in mind. And as with Chris Claremont's Kitty Pryde and his revamped Magneto, Kanigher's and Kubert's Ragman seemed to be part of a 1970s mini-trend of openly Jewish superheroes. But in the early '70s, just before Chris Claremont would start to explore Magneto's Jewish roots, Magneto's co-creator Jack Kirby was airing his feelings about his World War II experiences in a new and very personal line of comics for DC.

KIRBY'S FOURTH WORLD

One of Jack Kirby's trademark characters was the curmudgeon with a heart of gold. A perfect example was the cop Terrible Turpin, a character whom Kirby seems to have modeled partially on himself. After Kirby's death, an episode of the TV show *Superman: The Animated Series* revealed that Turpin was Jewish, perhaps as a tribute to his Jewish creator.

In 1970, Jack Kirby caused shockwaves throughout the comic-book industry by leaving Marvel Comics, also known as the House of Ideas (a house he helped build), and defecting to the rival DC Comics. The reasons for the veteran comics creator's exodus from Marvel are complex and well documented. Simply put, he felt unappreciated and believed that he hadn't received proper credit for characters he had created or co-created. Kirby hoped for better treatment at his old employer DC, which welcomed him with open arms. It was here, as editor, writer, and penciler of his own line of science-fiction comics, that Kirby would establish one of the most personal and deeply layered works of his career, the Fourth World series.

The Fourth World line was an interlocking series composed of four monthly comic-book titles—*The New Gods, The Forever People, Mister Miracle,* and, for a time, *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen*—that all came together to form one big, sprawling epic. Kirby was creating a shared universe of characters under the umbrella of the larger DC Universe. Established DC characters rarely appeared in *New Gods, Mister Miracle,* or *Forever People,* and when they did—as in Deadman's two-episode stint in *Mister Miracle*—it was at the behest of the DC brass. As for Kirby's work on the already established title *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* (the other Fourth World titles were brand new), this was also a concession to DC's editors, who insisted that one of his books be an existing DC title. He did it in typically grand Kirbyesque fashion, by building a world of astonishing otherworldly characters into the established Superman mythos, like the villainous Morgan Edge, a mogul who now oversaw the *Daily Planet* through his Galaxy Broadcasting Company. Edge was secretly the hapless puppet of the otherworldly dictator Darkseid, and was therefore a "bridge" character between the Fourth World and the world of Superman. But despite the fact that one could open up any issue of Kirby's short-lived run on *Jimmy Olsen* and see the Man of Steel on almost every page, Kirby's Fourth World characters were not superheroes like the Last Son of Krypton, but rather *deities*.

In Marvel's *Journey Into Mystery* #83 (August 1962), Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and Lee's brother Larry Lieber had introduced the character Thor, the god of thunder in Norse mythology. In 1963, as a back-up feature in *Journey Into Mystery* (retitled *The Mighty Thor* three years later), Lee and Kirby had created a series of strips called "Tales of Asgard" to enrich the backstory of the Norse gods by describing, among other matters, the origins of the rivalry between Thor and Loki. When he was plotting the "Tales of Asgard" stories, Kirby originally planned to have the series build up to the two planets at war, leading to Ragnarok, the cataclysmic battle of Norse myth that would put an end to Thor and the rest of his pantheon. He never got to present Ragnarok in the "Tales of Asgard," however. The closest he came at Marvel was cannibalizing aspects of this epic and using them in an "Inhumans" storyline for *Fantastic Four*.

But at DC, Kirby was able to use Ragnarok as a starting point for the Fourth World, since—although he never said this was the reason—the first issue of *New Gods* begins with the death of Thor and his ilk! The old Norse Gods are never named in *New Gods;* the series merely starts with a two-page "Epilogue" (itself a clue that Kirby was picking up where he had left off at Marvel) wherein we see warring tribes of armored otherworldly gods duking it out on a battlefield wreathed in flame. Their heavily armored costumes wouldn't be out of place in the pages of *Journey Into Mystery* or *The Mighty Thor*. The narration intones, "There came a time when the Old Gods died!" Again, Kirby never mentions Thor, Loki, or their cohorts by name, nor does he show any recognizable characters from the pages of *The Mighty Thor;* how could he, since those characters were owned by Marvel? But he could hint, in a clever, writerly way, and that's exactly what he did. Here Kirby is telling us that these characters are the successors of the gods of ancient myth, just as mighty and powerful, but different somehow. It's as though he's saying, "If you liked Thor, you ain't seen nothin' yet!"

Jack Kirby's Fourth World saga had an enormous impact on pop culture, influencing George Lucas's *Star Wars* films.

But to call the Fourth World series a follow-up to *The Mighty Thor* is really not to do it justice. While *the Mighty Thor* was set in a world of magical fantasy and ancient myth, The Fourth World was set in a science-fiction universe, featuring alien worlds, super-powered warriors, and genetic experimentation. And it owed much to the subgenre of sci-fi known as space opera, the type of science fiction

popularized by the novelist Edgar Rice Burroughs (*The Warlord of Mars*) and the *Flash Gordon* cartoonist Alex Raymond. But like the work of any great storyteller, Kirby's work has recurring themes. And as in Kirby's Thor stories, his Fourth World stories are also indebted to classical mythology. In this case, they draw less from Norse myth and more from Greek and Roman legends, as well such diverse sources as contemporary world history and the Bible.

For example, in *Mister Miracle* #1 (March-April 1971), Kirby introduced his escape artist protagonist Scott Free, who grows up to be the titular super escape artist Mister Miracle. As an infant, Scott Free was sent by his father, the noble Highfather of the peaceful planet New Genesis, to the warlike planet Apokolips. In exchange, Darkseid, the evil lord of Apokolips, sent his newborn son Orion to New Genesis to be trained in the ways of peace and love. The trade was supposed to seal a cease-fire agreement between the two planets, but because of Darkseid's treachery, the war only intensified. Throughout all four titles, the repercussions of that trade, the Apokolips/New Genesis war, and the warriors involved all play out on an epic scale. Of course, the biblical influence is obvious; the innocent babe separated from his parents and raised by his parents' persecutors is the story of Moses.

Because Kirby was not only drawing but also writing and editing the Fourth World stories, he was more in control of content than he had been at Marvel. He used this autonomy to create a fully realized science-fiction universe the breadth and complexity of which had never been seen before in mainstream comics. "Jack really regarded this as his opus," said Jon Bogdanove. "Because he really was writing and drawing the whole thing, without having to share credit. So I think he had more fully developed themes than he'd hinted at in his early life." This is the first sustained attempt to do in comics what had previously only been done in novels, like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. As did Tolkien in his trilogy, Kirby was attempting a multi-part epic with a clearly defined beginning and end. His intent was to eventually play out the grand Fourth World epic over the course of several years and thousands of pages, and then in the end collect and reedit the various accumulated stories into a series of novel-length hardcover volumes. He didn't know it, but he was attempting to create what would come to be known as the graphic novel.

The Fourth World series can not only be read as a reconceptualization of stories from the Bible, but also as a metaphor for the Jewish experience during the Holocaust. During World War II, Jack Kirby

served in the trenches in Europe. Jon Bogdanove sees Apokolips as a metaphor for Nazi Germany: "I think his struggle during the war—and with the Jewish struggle during the war—really shaped his concept of Apokolips. Because you have a 'führer' character [whose skin is] gray, who's in charge, his name's Darkseid, but the 'seid' is spelled like a German word, Dark*seid*. So it's [got] sort of a German spelling to it. Plus there are supporting villains [with names like] Vermin Vundabar and Steppenwolf. He taps into the German thing quite a bit.

"And then there's the image of Apokolips, which is an ashy, sooty, highly industrial-ized nightmare of a planet. With open fire pits that burn sootily, and if you examine Apokolips, particularly the Armagetto [the slum area of Apokolips], it's very evocative of the industrialized war machine that Germany was running. And I think Armagetto was really about the ghettos in Poland and elsewhere. Because you have all these people who work and die for Darkseid, and there are all these slogans that are sort of like the propaganda or dispiriting slogans that used to be put up everywhere. [For the Nazis it was] 'Work Will Make You Free,' but [in Darkseid's case it's], 'Work Is Life, Death Is Freedom In Darkseid's World.' And even if you look at the denizens of Armagetto, they look like—the archetypes he's drawing on are—they're war refugees! So it's pretty hard to be of that generation and not be shaped by World War II. But I think his experience as an American Jew going over there was particularly intense. And he wouldn't be much of an artist if he didn't tap into that stuff."

But Bogdanove admits that this subtext is not obvious to all. "This might be something that other Jews would read into it more readily than other people," Bogdanove noted. "And I don't think that Jack was in any way writing 'code' for his Jewish readers. He was just processing what was in his heart and head. There are other analogies there too, but wow, Highfather sure looks biblical! He's got a staff, a beard, robes—he looks very Moses-like!"

Jack Kirby's Mister Miracle, a superhero patterned after the real-life superhero Harry Houdini.

And whether he realized it or not, the Fourth World stories are rife with metaphors about the modern Jewish condition. The very concept of baby-switching between feral Orion and compassionate Scott Free is most definitely a study in nature versus nurture, but the embattled New Genesis can be seen as a stand-in for the real-life embattled Jewish homeland. "You can think of New Genesis in terms of Olympus, or Heaven," commented Bogdanove, "but you can also think of it in terms of Israel or Judaism. Because New Genesis might refer to the reestablishment of Israel. 'New Genesis' means the new beginning of Israel. Israel used to be, and then it wasn't, and then it was again! So that might apply. You might fortify this area with the biblical imagery of Highfather. So what you have in the case of Orion and Mister Miracle, it's obviously a nature versus nurture thing. And Orion is a Nazi by birth, who was specifically bred to be an animal. Bred to be, genetically, a Nazi super-soldier, an Apokolips super-soldier. He is the son of the Führer. And on that world, they design their children. At least, the powerful people do. He is the prince of Apokolips, delivered into the hands of Moses, or Israel, or the Jews, if you think of New Genesis as Jewish. So can the higher ideals of a good moral upbringing and a loving environment turn a beast into a hero? And so in that case, nurture changes Orion's life. He must always struggle against his nature, but the nurture turns him into a hero, where he might have been the most ferocious villain Darkseid had. Likewise, you have Mister Miracle, a nice Jewish boy, who is dumped into a Hitler Youth program basically in [Darkseid's lieutenant] Granny Goodness's orphanage to be molded and shaped into a Nazi. But Scott's inherent goodness makes it impossible! So I think the message there is that nurture can make it possible to overcome bad, but bad can't overcome good nature. I think that's it. But in terms of allusions, it's very much like Moses being left in the rushes and raised as an Egyptian by Pharaoh. On both sides!
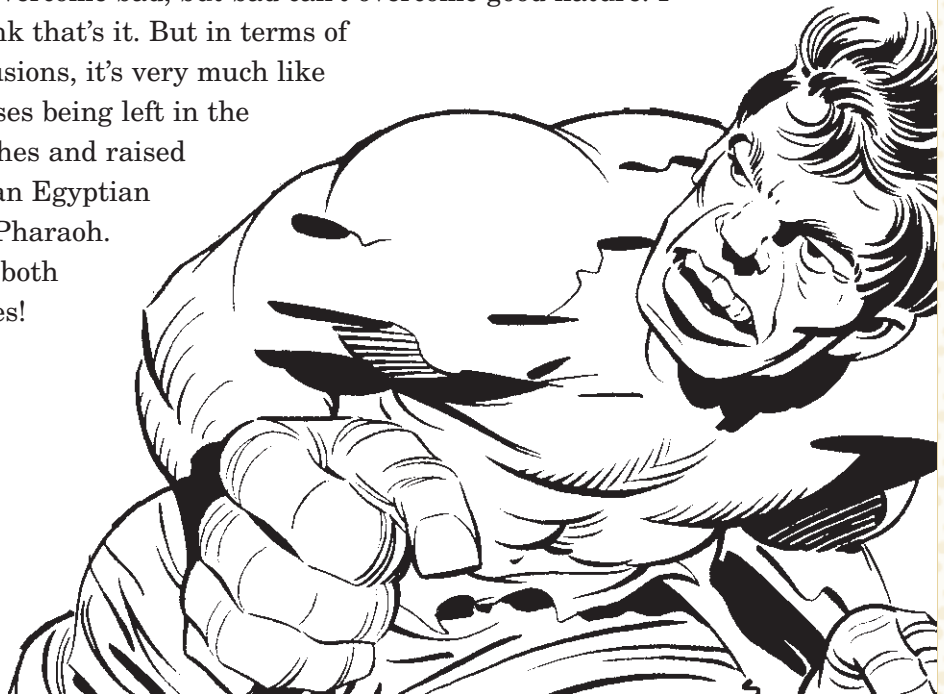
Scott Free is raised as an Apokolips youth, Orion is raised as a New Genesis youth. And what are the changes made in their life?"

Although the more personal references in Kirby's Forth World titles were usually subtextual, he sometimes dealt with overt World War II references, as when in *Mister Miracle* #13 Scott Free apprehends the Nazi war criminal Albert Von Killowitz. Then there was the time that Kirby resurrected his 1940s characters the Newsboy Legion in the pages of *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen.* The incorrigible gang of street toughs were clearly based on the Lower East Side street gangs of Kirby's boyhood. And the Newsboy Legionnaire known as Scrapper was a pint-sized version of Kirby, an analog like Ben Grimm. But aside from references to his experiences in World War II and on the Lower East Side, Kirby also based one of the Fourth World characters on a famous Jewish comics writer.

In the book *Mister Miracle,* Kirby had explored Scott Free's journey from conflicted warrior on Apokolips to Houdini-style escape artist on Earth. To counterbalance Scott's caring nature, Kirby continually pitted him against the biggest sleazebags in the galaxy. In January 1972's *Mister Miracle* #6, Kirby introduced a Machiavellian swindler known as Funky Flashman into the series. Funky Flashman was a blatant caricature of Stan Lee, down to his sunglasses and beard (which Lee was known for wearing at the time). In the opening splash panel, as Funky Flashman barks at his servant, Houseroy—a caricature of Lee's protégé, the Marvel writer/editor Roy Thomas—Kirby's narrative captions intone, "In the shadow world between success and failure, there lives the driven little man who dreams of having it all!!! The opportunistic spoiler without character or values, who preys on all things like a cannibal!!!—Including you!!! Like death and taxes, we all must deal with him!" Flashman explains that he wants to be Mister Miracle's manager, but he's soon revealed as an exploitative swindler. Funky steals Scott's Mother Box (a wondrous gadget from New Genesis), but Mother Box gives off a signal, and a troupe of Apokolips amazons are following the signal. The amazons, known as the Female Furies, invade and destroy Funky's house. And what a house it is: Funky lives in the Mockingbird Estates, a dilapidated antebellum manor once owned by a slave-holding southern colonel. This house is a metaphor for Marvel itself, which was known as the "House of Ideas."

Here Kirby was saying that Marvel—like the Mockingbird Estates—was a house that had gone to seed, guilty of treating its talent like slaves. But Kirby's beef was largely with Stan Lee. Kirby was angry because in the press, Lee was often mentioned as the sole creator of

The two episodes of Jack Kirby's run on *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* in which he wove the real-life Jewish comedian Don Rickles into the action. It didn't always make sense, but it wasn't boring! As the cover says, "Don't Ask! Just Buy It!"
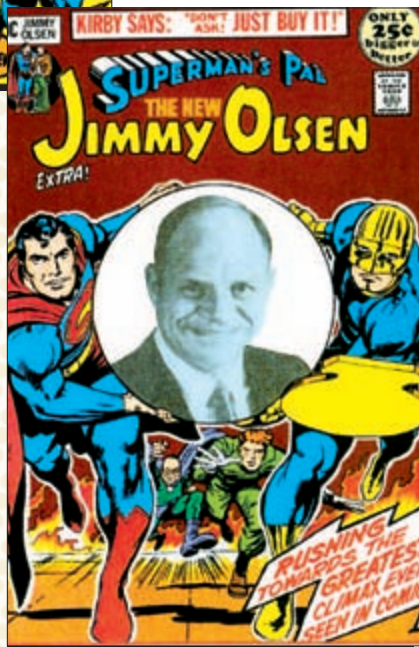
characters like the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, and the X-Men. Newspaper and magazine articles often didn't mention Kirby at all, or if they did, it was as a mere artist for hire who illuminated Lee's vision. This Stan-centric view of the Marvel Universe was in a sense inevitable. Whenever a reporter would visit Marvel, Lee was convivial, chatty, and always ready with a quote for the press. More important, he was around. Lee was management and Kirby was labor. Journalists observing the Marvel offices saw Lee as the one and only architect behind the company's products, even if that wasn't true.

Kirby, meanwhile, was a freelance artist who was less often present, and when he was, he wasn't as instantly charming and sociable as Lee. And because of the perception that Lee was orchestrating the show like a symphony conductor, Lee soon became known as Marvel's public face and went on lecture tours all over the country. Kirby did not and thus was less recognizable, even though he was equally important to Marvel's success. While Lee didn't have any control over the press's take on the House of Ideas, he didn't often speak out against it, which Kirby knew well—he kept a pile of press clippings in his desk drawer that claimed Lee was the sole creator of the Marvel Universe. And so, with no copyright or creative custody of his Marvel co-creations, and without even credit in the comic books themselves, Kirby, a born storyteller, struck back in the only way he knew how—with stories.

In addition to being chock full of jaw-dropping action sequences, Kirby's Fourth World stories were sometimes … just plain weird. In a supreme example of comics surrealism, *Jimmy Olsen* #139 and #141 featured—alongside Kirby creations like the Newsboy Legion and the Guardian—the Jewish comedian Don Rickles. Kirby, a big fan of Rickles's stand-up act, obtained permission from the famous insult comic to depict him in the comic book. Rickles thought that his cartoon likeness would be depicted insulting Superman in the same manner that Rickles had famously insulted Johnny Carson when appearing on *The Tonight Show*. He thought wrong. The main problem was that although Jack Kirby was a brilliant artist-writer of

action stories, he wasn't a gag writer. He didn't understand that in a story guest-starring Don Rickles, one has to balance the action with equal helpings of comedy. Instead, he naively threw Rickles into a rather convoluted plot revolving around a human bomb and Rickles's inept doppelgänger, Goody Rickels (spelled that way on purpose). By story's end, much to the real-life Don Rickles's dismay, there were two glaring problems with his comic-book counterpart: he wasn't given much room to be funny, and he never got to share a scene with Superman.

Shortly, however, Kirby became frustrated with his work at DC. He had begun the Fourth World line with the idea that after writing, drawing, and editing the first few issues of *Orion, The Forever People,* and *Mister Miracle,* he would simply plot and edit the stories, letting colleagues like Wally Wood (*MAD*), Don Heck (*Iron Man*), and Steve Ditko (*Spider-Man*) take over the art chores while his assistants Mark Evanier and Steve Sherman would dialogue his plots. But soon it became apparent that DC wasn't letting him do that; it wanted him writing and drawing each issue, nervous that if he left the books, sales might plummet. At the same time, there were other factors weighing heavily on the veteran cartoonist: one of the DC editors was changing his dialogue without his knowledge; DC hired the veteran Superman artist Al Plastino to redraw the Superman faces in *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen,* since Kirby's rendition of the Man of Steel didn't gel with their idea of what he should look like; and some older DC employees, harboring grudges from past decades, openly badmouthed his work. There were also the fans who had expected Kirby's DC work to be more akin to his Marvel superhero concepts like *Fantastic Four* or *Thor,* instead of this more decidedly non-superheroic (and personal) work.

Then there was the fact that Kirby was literally competing with himself. Not only was he competing against Martin Goodman's reprinting of 1960s-era Lee and Kirby Marvel stories, but his new non–Fourth World DC comics, like the dystopian saga *Kamandi, the*

THE ESCAPIST: © 2007 Michael Chabon. Used with permission.

Michael Chabon's superhero character, the Escapist is, like Jack Kirby's Mister Miracle, both a symbol of the Jewish experience and a character inspired by Harry Houdini.

Jack Kirby's Fourth World saga often took place in the slums of the hellish planet Apokolips, a metaphor for the ghettos of World War II-era Europe.

Last Boy on Earth, were selling well enough in 1972 to convince the DC publisher Carmine Infantino to put *Orion* and *The Forever People* on "hiatus," equivalent to canceling them. At that point, *Mister Miracle* was allowed to continue and Kirby had to simplify the storylines so they didn't involve the greater Fourth World mythology. This didn't save *Mister Miracle,* however, which was canceled in 1974, putting the final nail in the coffin of Kirby's interlocking epic. And by that time, Superman's Pal, *Jimmy Olsen* had long since "de-Kirbyfied" itself and went on the same course as it had pre-Kirby, as just another Superman companion title, as though nothing had happened. But something had happened. The Fourth World remains, as Mark Evanier wrote in his introduction to the 1998 reprint volume *Jack Kirby's New Gods,* "comics' great unfinished symphony." And "unfinished" is the right word, because the overarching epic Kirby was concocting was never allowed to reach a satisfying conclusion in which he could wrap up all the story's strands.

Many industry professionals have speculated as to why the Fourth World wasn't a bigger success. Chris Claremont reasons that the absence of the Lee-Kirby dynamic may be to blame. "Without Stan Lee around," Claremont theorized, "Jack didn't have an expert pitchman to help him sell his ideas to the higher-ups. That was one of Stan's great strengths. In Stan, Jack had a rabbi, a conscience, a sounding board. Now he was alone. Now he had none of that."

IN CREATING the Fourth World series, Kirby set many precedents. He envisioned the first collected editions, limited series, and company-wide crossovers, even if he never got to implement any of these plans. He created many characters, like Orion and Darkseid, who continue to this day, both in comic books and in animated TV series like the Cartoon Network's recent hit *Justice League.* In fact, Darkseid has become one of DC's most important supervillains over the past couple of decades, in company-wide crossover events and miniseries like "Super Powers" and "Legends." One of Kirby's non–Fourth World characters from this era, OMAC, has figured prominently in DC's recent "Infinite Crisis" crossover event.

But even though the Fourth World series wasn't a big hit in its day, it clearly influenced other media. Consider George Lucas's original *Star Wars* movie trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983), in which many characters, themes, and even plot points are reminiscent of those in the Fourth World. While George Lucas has never publicly admitted that Kirby's work was an influence on his own, the parallels are clear. Both the Fourth World and *Star Wars* feature a baby-switching motif, a protagonist unaware that he is the son of the antagonist (Orion and Luke Skywalker), and a kindly old

man who won't tell the hero the truth about his father (Highfather and Obi-Wan Kenobi). The *Star Wars* characters believe in a higher plane of existence called "The Force," and the Fourth World characters believe in a higher plane of existence called "The Source." In *Star Wars,* the Force has a "dark side," and in the Fourth World the villain is literally called "Darkseid." Kirby's wizened old mystic Himon even bears a certain resemblance (in personality if not in looks) to *Star Wars*'s wizened old mystic Yoda. "I'd be enormously surprised if George Lucas didn't read the Fourth World series," remarked Bogdanove. "Because I'm of the school that thinks the roots of *Star Wars,* or at least a strong influence on *Star Wars,* was Jack Kirby's Fourth World. [As in the Fourth World], in *Star Wars,* the hero is always fighting his 'dark side,' he's actually the son of the bad guy, he was planted Moses-like in a peaceful place…. I wouldn't be surprised if Lucas read some *Fantastic Four* too, because the whole prosthetic armor on the bad guy reminds me of [Fantastic Four villain] Doctor Doom. I mean, you know, if you think about it, Doctor Doom has a cloak and an iron mask, and prosthetic armor. And Darth Vader has that too! What's more, Darth Vader has a Nazi-type helmet! So I think there's a pretty strong connection. I think it's been discussed a lot, I don't know if Lucas has ever admitted to it, but *Star Wars* is plenty enough original. He didn't rob Jack, he was merely influenced by Jack. As we all are, you know?"

Indeed. For perhaps most important, even if he didn't reap the financial rewards that were rightly due to him for his vast contributions to popular culture, Jack Kirby has strongly influenced the last three generations of comic-book professionals, giving them something great to strive for. A two-part episode of the TV show *Superman: The Animated Series* (1996–2000) called "Apokolips … Now!" featured some of Kirby's Fourth World characters, including Darkseid and the policeman Dan "Terrible" Turpin. In the episode, Terrible Turpin—who is drawn by the animators to resemble Jack Kirby—is vaporized by Darkseid. The character is given a Jewish funeral, complete with a rabbi reciting the kaddish, the Jewish

In images like this from *Fantastic Four* by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, we can clearly see how Doctor Doom's hooded cape and metallic face mask influenced that of Darth Vader.

who have admitted to being under Kirby's spell include the cartoonists Mike Mignola *(Hellboy)* and John Byrne *(Man of Steel),* the comic-book writer Alan Moore *(V For Vendetta),* the novelist Michael Chabon *(The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay),* and filmmakers Joss Whedon *(Buffy the Vampire Slayer)* and Brad Bird *(The Incredibles).* And animated TV shows like the Cartoon Network's *Minoriteam* and Nickelodeon's *Fairly OddParents* routinely pay homage to *The King.* As the Jewish magician David Copperfield wrote in his introduction to the reprint collection *Jack Kirby's Mister Miracle,* "He was a contemporary Homer, spinning tales that entertain and that function as allegories about courage, the battle of good and evil, and the willingness to dream."

prayer of mourning. The episode was a moving tribute to both Kirby and his creative legacy. May 2004 saw the publication of *Fantastic Four* #511, written by Mark Waid, illustrated by Mike Wieringo and Karl Kesel, in which the FF go to heaven and meet God—who happens to look like Jack Kirby, cigar and all. In the words of Chris Claremont, "The past 40 years of comics history wouldn't have happened without Jack Kirby."

Jack Kirby surrounded by the many characters he created or co-created for Marvel Comics.

Spider-man, Fantastic Four, Avengers, and related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc. Used with permission.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

During the 1960s and early 1970s, while superhero comics were undergoing a revolution in terms of character development—the friendly champions of the Golden Age giving way to the brooding warriors of the Silver Age—the burgeoning hippie counterculture was beginning to produce its own comic art. Austin, Texas, was the birthplace of this new underground comics movement. In 1962, the Texan cartoonist Frank Stack self-published *The Adventures of Jesus* under the nom-de-cartoon "Foolbert Sturgeon," so as not to anger his Bible belt neighbors with this potentially offensive comic. *The Adventures of Jesus* is thought by many, including Stack's colleague (and fellow Texan) Gilbert Shelton, to be the first underground comic, even though it was simply a photocopied publication not meant to be widely circulated. By 1965, alternative newspapers such as *Yarrowstalks* and the *Chicago Mirror* began to showcase underground comic strips.

Within the next couple of years, the underground comics movement was officially underway. "Underground comics" is the catch-all term for the alternative comics from this era, which contained subject matter that would never have found its way into mainstream comics. Underground comics stories were either sexually charged, drug-fueled, or politically radical (sometimes all three). They also frequently featured the autobiographical exploits of their writers and artists. Robert Crumb, the movement's first superstar, was prone to creating whole comic books exploring his troubled—often disturbing—relationships with women. If superheroes showed up at all, they were parodies, like Gilbert Shelton's *Wonder Warthog*. And although this first wave of underground cartoonists was not as predominantly Jewish as their more mainstream, superhero-doodling predecessors, there were some Jewish cartoonists in the mix. And of course, since many of the undergrounds were autbio-

Perhaps the greatest power couple in the history of underground comix, Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Aline is Jewish, while many people think that Robert wishes he were Jewish.

graphical, they proved to be a perfect forum for talking about Jewish history and identity issues in comic-book form.

The new generation of underground comics creators—most of whom had grown up devouring Harvey Kurtzman's *MAD* and Will Eisner's *The Spirit*—took root in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco, where Jewish cartoonists like Diane Noomin and Trina Robbins drew cartoons for newspapers like the *Berkeley Barb* and the *San Francisco Oracle;* and in New York City, where newspapers like the *East Village Other* and *The Realist* featured the works of the Jewish cartoonists Art Spiegelman and Sam Gross.

The alternative papers soon proved inadequate to hold the sheer amount of comic-strip stories being produced, and soon underground comic books began popping up. These were just as subversive as the strips that had appeared in underground newspapers; indeed, underground comic books often called themselves "comix" to distinguish themselves from mainstream superhero fare published by companies like Marvel and DC. Underground comix publishers included Ron Turner's Last Gasp, Denis Kitchen's Kitchen Sink Press, and Don Donahue's Apex Novelties. Given the books' adult content and graphics, they were sold in "head shops" alongside psychedelic posters and drug paraphernalia. With its somewhat rickety distribution network, the underground comix industry was never as well organized as that of mainstream comic books. "'Underground comics' and 'industry' were never phrases that went together," laughed the *Maus* cartoonist Art Spiegelman. "Unless you meant 'hard working' by 'industry.' Which was occasionally true."
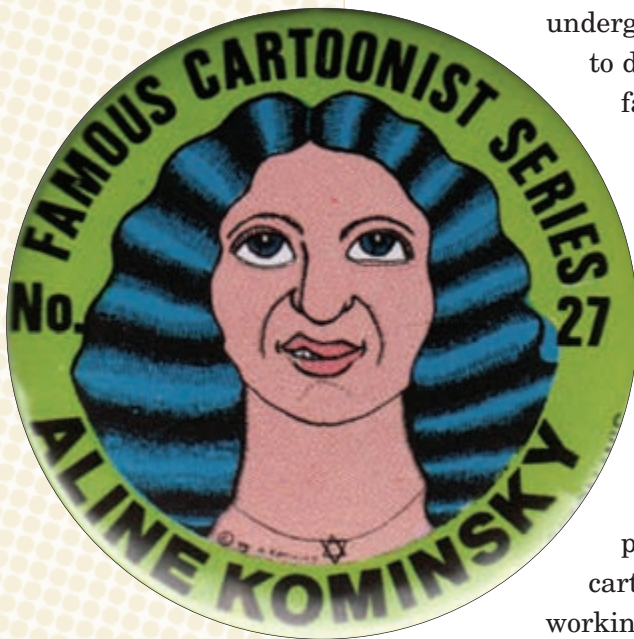
A self-portrait of the legendary underground cartoonist Aline Komisky-Crumb, the wife of the equally famed cartoonist Robert Crumb. Note the Star of David necklace. (From Denis Kitchen's "Famous Cartoonists" button series.)

The underground comix community also pioneered the rise of female comic-book writers and artists, including strips by Jewish women about Jewish women, something one certainly never saw from Marvel or DC. In 1970, *It Ain't Me, Babe* became the first comic book with an all-female editorial and creative staff. One of its popular strips featured Diane Noomin's character DiDi Glitz, a parody and deconstruction of the postmodern Jewish American Princess stereotype. Aline Kominsky, the future wife of the legendary cartoonist Robert Crumb, soon followed with her own autobiographical underground comic strip, "Love That Bunch," in which she detailed her adventures as a self-proclaimed sex-crazed Jewish neurotic. Trina Robbins, the daughter of a Yiddish

newspaper journalist, moved the Jewish women's experience into political terrain with her commemoration of the deadly Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, which she presented in comic-strip form in the pages of *Lilith,* the Jewish feminist magazine.

Why were so many female cartoonists drawn to the "autobio" genre? Indeed, it seems as though most of the women in comics have at least experimented with autobio. Robbins has a theory as to why this is so: "I'm a storyteller. I prefer stories [about other people] to autobiographies, but I know that [autobio comics] is a woman's thing, that a lot of women are really into that. And in fact, if you look at the past, if you look at the 'love comics' [of the 1950s], even though they were phony, even though they weren't really confessionals, they were done in the style of confessionals. And you look at the romance magazines that preceded the love comics, they're all done like that too, they're all supposed to be true stories, even if they're not. So I think there's something about certain women, obviously a lot of women, who really like this confessional style. I happen not to. I'm a weird one." Why does Robbins think that autobio comics are such a traditionally feminine area? "Women tend to discuss personal things with each other much more than men do. Everyone knows that. Men get together and punch each other in the biceps and say, 'How 'bout those Mets?' Women get together and they talk about their gynecology problems, and the problems they're having with their boyfriends, and digestive problems. Everything! Women are much more eager—rather than just willing, [they're] eager—to share personal things with each other, than men are."

However, some male underground cartoonists were just as eager to create personal and intimate works. In 1972, Art Spiegelman published a three-page version of "Maus," a memoir of his father's Holocaust experiences in *Funny Aminals* #1 (misspelling intentional), an underground comix anthology from Apex Novelties. Born in 1948 in Stockholm, Sweden, to Vladek and Anja Spiegelman, both Holocaust survivors, Spiegelman had vivid childhood memories of his father telling him stories before bedtime. But unlike most parents, who tell their children fairy tales, Vladek Spiegelman told his son tales of his experiences in Auschwitz. Art Spiegelman realized that there was something odd about the fact that he was sent off to dreamland with these disturbing stories floating in his head. And if he found it odd, maybe readers would find it interesting.

Spiegelman had been tapped by the editor of *Funny Aminals,* Terry Zwigoff (later the director of films like *Crumb* and *Ghost World*), to

contribute a strip. The only criteria was that it should involve anthropomorphic animals. Many of Spiegelman's colleagues in underground comix were famed for their raunchy comic strips filled with sexual imagery and drug references. Underground comix were seen as a celebration of the id run wild, a shattering of every existing taboo. Even Spiegelman himself had indulged in these types of "angry young man" comix, but by 1972 he had mellowed. He decided that his contribution to *Funny Aminals* would be about something serious, something important. He had originally planned to do a comic strip about racism, with mice as black people and cats as white people. However, he was afraid that this would look like a clumsy attempt by a white cartoonist to absolve himself of liberal guilt. Then he had a brainstorm: why not have the mice be the *Jews* and the cats be the *Germans!*

Courtesy of Leela Corman

A self-portrait of Leela Corman, a member of the current vanguard of Jewish female cartoonists creating autobiographical comics.

How was "Maus" initially received? "Oh … I don't know," Spiegelman chuckled. "I don't think my editor liked it very much. But editors there were just people gathering [the strips] together and bringing them to the printers. And whatever you did, they published. But … Terry Zwigoff, I don't think he had much use for it. It wasn't oriented toward response. It wasn't like, 'If people like this I'll do more of it,' or, 'If people don't like this I'll do less of it.' It was more like, 'I found something. I found something that brought out a better strain in me.' By the standards of the underground comix surrounding it, even many of the other stories in that issue of *Funny Aminals,* it was very restrained. And so the visual style was restrained. Although, not nearly as restrained as what became the [1986 graphic novel-length] *Maus* book after. And doing that three-page strip I realized that I had a lot of unfinished business, it was a three-page strip and there was more, much more here that I could tap back into."

It took Spiegelman a long time to get his father to open up to him more about his Holocaust experiences, at which point he was able to expand "Maus" into its 1986 graphic novel format. But back in the 1970s, Spiegelman was too busy with other projects to even think of more ambitious plans for "Maus." One of those projects was the revolutionary underground comix anthology magazine *Arcade,* which Spiegelman co-founded in 1975 with Bill Griffith, the creator of *Zippy*

the Pinhead creator Bill Griffith. *Arcade* often featured stories by Jewish writers and cartoonists. In her trademark primitivist style, Diane Noomin created brutally confessional strips about her awkward childhood. Through her "Blabette Yakowitz" comic strips, Aline Kominsky deftly lampooned the gossipy yentas she had grown up with in suburban Long Island. And the future *Village Voice* columnist Jim Hoberman wrote columns for *Arcade* where he commented on pop cultural apocrypha like the corporate history of Coca-Cola. Unfortunately, however, *Arcade* lasted little more than a year. Underground comix had gone into a tailspin starting in 1972, and by the time *Arcade* came out it fell victim to two factors: a fickle public with changing tastes, and the police, which kept closing down the head shops that sold magazines like *Arcade.* The first wave of underground comix were for all intents and purposes finished, although a few underground publishers would show real staying power.

One of them was Harvey Pekar, who self-published an autobiographical comic-book series called *American Splendor.* Pekar, a curmudgeonly file clerk in Cleveland, was born in 1939 to Polish Jewish parents. In the early 1970s, he hit upon a brilliant notion; perhaps his everyman trials and tribulations would have a certain appeal to people who didn't like superhero comics. He started writing comic-book stories about his everyday life in 1972, inspired by the work of his friend Robert Crumb. Crumb would illustrate many of his scripts, which the file clerk had "written" in rough storyboard form illustrated with stick figures (Pekar openly admits that he can't draw). In 1976 a collection of Pekar's comic-book stories was published as *American Splendor* #1, which boasted a two-page strip by Crumb as well as a cover by Crumb's fellow underground

I TELL YOU, THERE'S A POGROM GOING ON IN GERMANY TODAY!

ONE FELLOW TOLD US OF HIS COUSIN WHAT WAS LIVING IN GERMANY...

JUD

..HE HAD TO SELL HIS BUSINESS TO A GERMAN AND RUN OUT FROM THE COUNTRY WITHOUT EVEN THE MONEY.

I AM A FILTHY JEW

IT WAS VERY HARD THERE FOR THE JEWS—TERRIBLE!

ANOTHER FELLOW TOLD US OF A RELATIVE IN BRANDENBERG—THE POLICE CAME TO HIS HOUSE AND NO ONE HEARD AGAIN FROM HIM.

This Town is Jew Free

IT WAS MANY, MANY SUCH STORIES—SYNAGOGUES BURNED, JEWS BEATEN WITH NO REASON, WHOLE TOWNS PUSHING OUT ALL JEWS—EACH STORY WORSE THAN THE OTHER.

LET'S HOPE THOSE NAZI GANGSTERS GET THROWN OUT OF POWER!

JUST PRAY THAT THEY DON'T START A WAR!!
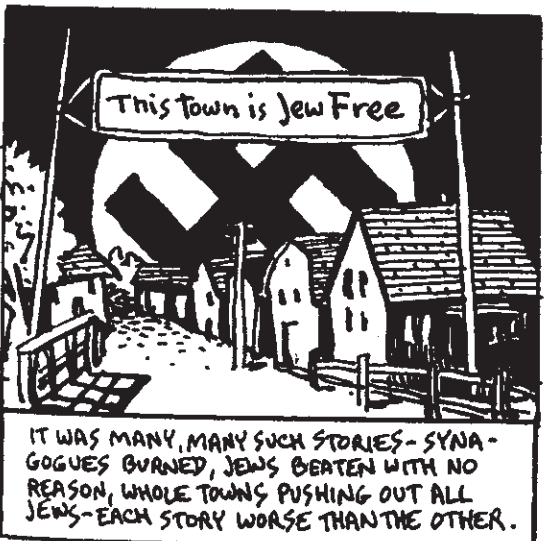
Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* single-handedly did more to raise awareness of comics as an art form than any other comic book that came before it. It also showed that you can tell a serious story about Jewish history in comics form. These are two separate pages from his Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

The most unlikely movie star in recent years had been Harvey Pekar, the subject of the Oscar-nominated film *American Splendor* of 2003, an undeniably faithful adaptation of Pekar's own comic-book series. Pekar also appears in the film's documentary sequences, where he is interviewed by the filmmakers.

comix pioneer Manuel "Spain" Rodriguez. With *American Splendor,* Harvey Pekar immediately set himself apart from many of his colleagues. Unlike them, he rarely used sex in his stories, and when he did it was in service of the narrative, not for mere titillation. Nor did Pekar use psychedelic drugs as his muse, unlike many of his contemporaries. With the goal of telling truthful, real-life (and sober) stories, he quickly earned the respect of his peers, and over time such comics luminaries as Jim Woodring, Alan Moore, Val Mayerik, Frank Stack, and Chester Brown would illustrate his stories. Pekar self-published the first 15 issues of *American Splendor,* funding them with his full-time job as a clerk in Cleveland's veterans hospital (he retired in 2003). Subsequent issues of *American Splendor* have been published by such esteemed comic-book publishers as Tundra, Dark Horse, and (most recently) Vertigo, and collected editions of his comics have been put out by Doubleday, Four Walls Eight Windows, and Ballantine Books.
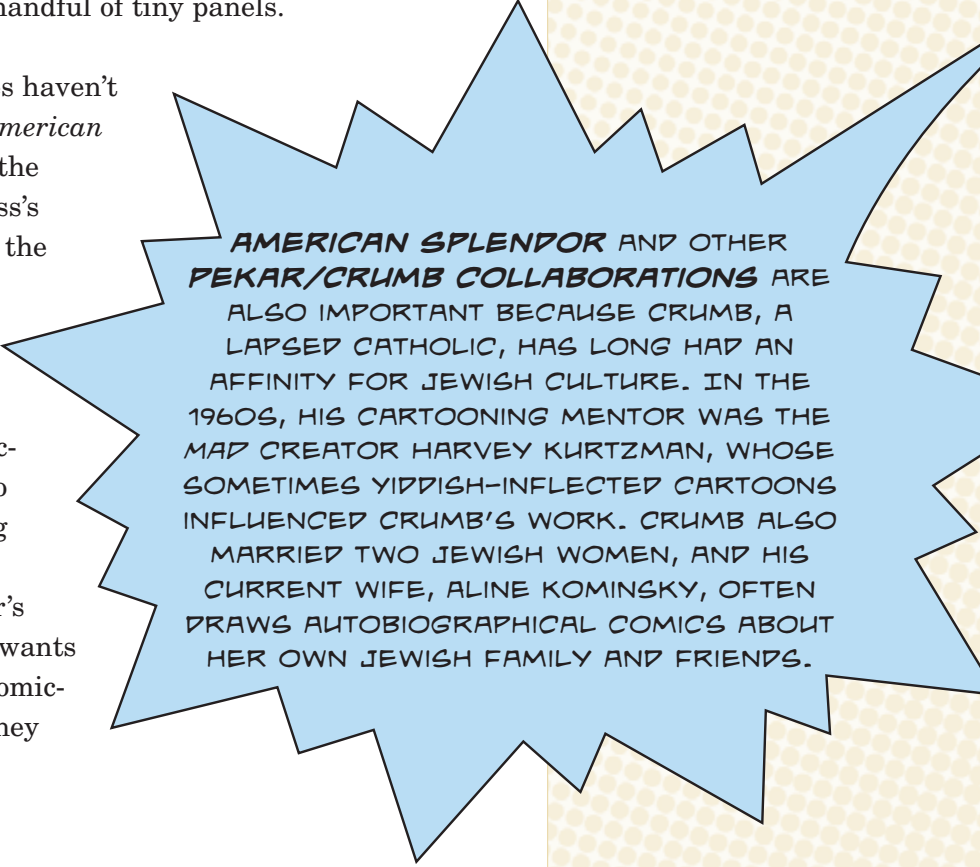
It's curious that Pekar kept his day job even after he became fairly well known for his comic-book writing career. A more mainstream comics personality might have tried to parlay his/her fame into a job writing for better-paying mainstream comics, or perhaps writing for film or TV. But then, that's not Harvey Pekar. As anyone familiar with *American Splendor* knows, Pekar shuns celebrity and the glitz and glamour that come with it. During the late 1980s, he was featured eight times on NBC's *Late Night with David Letterman.* During what would be Pekar's final appearance, however, his on-air criticisms of NBC's parent company General Electric led to an ugly (and unscripted) argument between Pekar and Letterman. Subsequently, the curmudgeonly file clerk was banned from the show until the early '90s. This, too, is classic Pekar: stand up for what you believe in, at all costs.

Like most underground comic-book writers, Harvey Pekar has never shied away from sharing the most embarrassing and painful moments of his life. After all, the tagline for *American Splendor* is "From Off the Streets of Cleveland," and the image of himself that he promotes is that of the common man, warts and all. He certainly didn't shy away from his aforementioned fight with Letterman (chronicled in a handful of stories collected in *The New American*

Splendor Anthology in 1991), in which Pekar paints himself as having some serious anger management issues. In the 1988 story "Rabbi's Vife" (illustrated by Drew Friedman), he presents himself as an absolute jerk, taunting an elderly Viennese Jewish doctor because of the latter's poor joke-telling skills.

And "Rabbi's Vife" was far from the only *American Splendor* story in which Pekar talked about Jewish characters or themes. In the 1987 story "Pa-ayper Reggs!!" illustrated by Robert Crumb, Pekar tells us about Jewish rag peddlers in 1920s New York, most of them Russian or Polish immigrants. The story begins with Pekar taking notes as an elderly friend is telling him about Jewish rag peddlers. Pekar's friend tells him about the rag peddler's clarion cry, "PA-AYPER REGGS!" Then the friend describes the typical rag peddler in the days before they had trucks: "Sitting on his wagon with a whip in his hand—this was local color!" We learn about how the peddlers made their money from the junkyard, from "shmates" (Yiddish for rags), and from paper that they took to the rag shop to be baled up. Then they would all go to Turk's Delicatessen and order corned beef and salami sandwiches and chocolate phosphates. The one who spent the most money was respected the most, because that meant he earned the most. The story paints a tantalizing portrait of 1920s-era Jewish immigrant life, and Pekar and Crumb accomplish their task with astonishing economy; the story is a mere two pages but it draws the reader in, weaving an elaborate world in a handful of tiny panels.

But Pekar's autobiographical tales haven't been limited to the pages of his *American Splendor* comic book. In 1989, in the twelfth issue of Kitchen Sink Press's comics anthology *Snarf,* he wrote the story "What Superman Means to Me," illustrated by the frequent *American Splendor* illustrator Gary Dumm. The brief tale depicts Pekar at a comic-book convention where he talks to Tim Gorman, a man who is trying to raise money for a statue of Superman in Siegel's and Shuster's hometown of Cleveland. Gorman wants Pekar to contribute to a charity comic-book he is publishing to raise money for the statue. "It'd be really

AMERICAN SPLENDOR AND OTHER *PEKAR/CRUMB COLLABORATIONS* ARE ALSO IMPORTANT BECAUSE CRUMB, A LAPSED CATHOLIC, HAS LONG HAD AN AFFINITY FOR JEWISH CULTURE. IN THE 1960S, HIS CARTOONING MENTOR WAS THE *MAD* CREATOR HARVEY KURTZMAN, WHOSE SOMETIMES YIDDISH-INFLECTED CARTOONS INFLUENCED CRUMB'S WORK. CRUMB ALSO MARRIED TWO JEWISH WOMEN, AND HIS CURRENT WIFE, ALINE KOMINSKY, OFTEN DRAWS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS ABOUT HER OWN JEWISH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

Harvey Pekar's story "Rabbi's Vife," illustrated by Drew Friedman.

appropriate if you did," Gorman points out. "Siegel and Shuster had a working class Jewish background like you." But Pekar is uncomfortable; after all, thanks to characters like Superman, the comic-book medium has been obsessed with superheroes to the point that it's practically a "one-genre medium." Then in a guest panel illustrated by Robert Crumb, we see Pekar imagining himself stomping on Superman, here drawn as a tubby old man, a superhero gone to seed. Pekar imagines himself yelling at the Man of Steel: "Chazzer! Choleria! Fake! A rich Jewish superhero like you—hogs the whole comic book field—won't do a thing for a serious Yiddische writer like me!!!" In response, Superman groans, "… Oy, Rachmones, Harvey, please! I ain't got time t'help everybody, do I?? I gotta fight big goysiche villains like Luthor … We got the Jewish welfare fund for guys like you." There's even a glossary in the upper right-hand corner of the panel that translates the various Yiddishisms ("Chazzer—Pig, Choleria—Cholera, Rachmones—Have pity").

IT'S NOT AS THOUGH PEKAR WAS EXACTLY OUT OF THE LIMELIGHT BEFORE THE 2003 *AMERICAN SPLENDOR* MOVIE. IN ADDITION TO THE *LETTERMAN* APPEARANCES, THERE WERE NO FEWER THAN TWO PRODUCED STAGE ADAPTATIONS OF *AMERICAN SPLENDOR* IN 1987 AND 1990, THE LATTER STARRING THE *SIMPSONS* ACTOR DAN CASTELLANETA AS PEKAR.

It's actually quite apropos that Pekar has written a story about Superman, because what makes *American Splendor* unique is its revelation that the ordinariness of everyday American life is itself full of splendor, and everyday people are the real heroes. The Everyman is the real Superman. For an everyman is surely what Harvey Pekar is. No leaping tall buildings for this guy, which suits his readers just fine. All his hard work seems to have paid off, with the 2003 release of the critically acclaimed film version of *American Splendor,* directed by the documentary filmmakers Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini. The film combined dramatizations of Pekar's comics (in which Paul Giamatti played Pekar and Hope Davis played his wife, Joyce Brabner) with documentary footage of the real Pekar and Brabner. The movie was nominated for a Best Adapted Screenplay Academy Award, which it lost to *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King.* But on the plus side, the film served as a feature-length advertisement for Pekar's comic books and his uniquely cranky worldview.

Since then, this reluctant celebrity's star has ascended into the pop culture firmament, and he is—whether he likes it or not—a public figure. With the fame that comes with being a movie star Harvey Pekar has gotten more high profile comics work, including the 2005
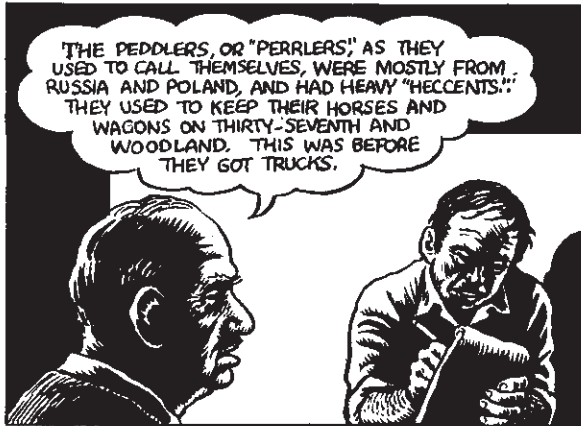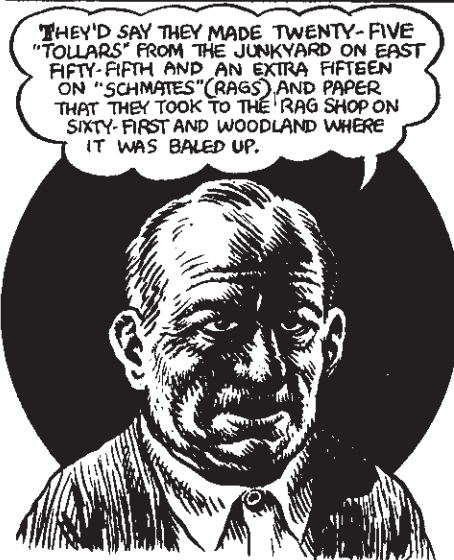
Harvey Pekar often deals with Jewish themes and characters in his comic book *American Splendor.*

One of the many collaborations between Harvey Pekar and his equally neurotic friend and creative partner, Robert Crumb.

graphic novel *The Quitter* (published by the DC imprint Vertigo), about Pekar's childhood as the son of hardworking Jewish immigrants. In this book, illustrated by the Jewish cartoonist Dean Haspiel, we see Pekar's overbearing mother, who calls him "Herschel." She's unimpressed with his stellar report card because amid all the As one B pokes out, dragging her son into mediocrity. Through this long-form work, we definitely get a sense of why Pekar is the way he is. In *The Quitter,* the present-day Pekar also muses about various choices he has made, like when he decided to stop working for the government in the late 1950s. He realizes that at that point, if he had kept his civil service job he could have moved out of his parents' house. Maybe his life would have been completely different. Then he pauses, assumes a contemplative pose, and shrugs, "Oh well, it's probably idle speculation. In the long run, we're all dead anyway." Not exactly sunshine and flowers, but then again, with Harvey Pekar, what you see is what you get, and what you see is the polar opposite of the cheery, colorful superhero world. Such balance is necessary in the comic-book industry; the medium needs cranks like Pekar to offset the relentlessly adolescent mindset of spandex and superpowers. It also needs writers like Pekar, who lend credence to comic books by aiding the medium's quest to be taken more seriously.

FROM NOVEL GRAPHICS TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

A book like Harvey Pekar's *The Quitter* wouldn't have been possible without Will Eisner, the legendary writer/cartoonist who had just begun to publish his own graphic novels two years after *American Splendor* debuted. In 1978, Eisner broke new ground in the comics industry with his publication of the pioneering graphic novel *A Contract with God* (originally published by Baronet Books). A strange chain of events had brought Eisner back into the comics industry. By the early 1970s, most comic books had reached the 40 cent mark; at that point, they were too expensive for children's meager allowances. However, due to inflation, the 40 cent price tag also made them appear too insignificant to be sold through traditional magazine distribution channels. Therefore, they had no place on magazine racks and they lost their spot in mom-and-pop candy stores and on newsstands, formerly the bread and butter for comic-book distribution. Comic books needed to find a new distribution outlet, which they did through the Jewish entrepreneur Phil Seuling, who helped engineer the first comic book specialty shops, or "comic-book stores." Comic-book stores only sold comics and related merchandise (action figures, posters, model kits, sci-fi novels, and so on). Back issue bins of comics from the Golden Age were all the rage in many of these comic-book stores, as they were at the then-new comic-book fan conventions, also pioneered by Seuling. At these comics conventions, fans could nostalgically reminisce about their favorite new and old comic books, meet guest artists, writers, and editors who were available for autograph signings, attend panel discussions featuring these very same comics professionals, and occasionally meet actors and filmmakers who had a constituency of sci-fi fans, such as the actors from TV's *Star Trek.*

In 1971, Eisner was at one of those very same conventions, called the Creation Con. "I was really astounded at [that] convention," he recalled. "I found people walking around carrying copies of *The Spirit.* I had no idea that it was even known; I thought *The Spirit* was dead." In 1948, while still working on *The Spirit,* Eisner formed a commercial art company called the American Visuals Corporation, which created
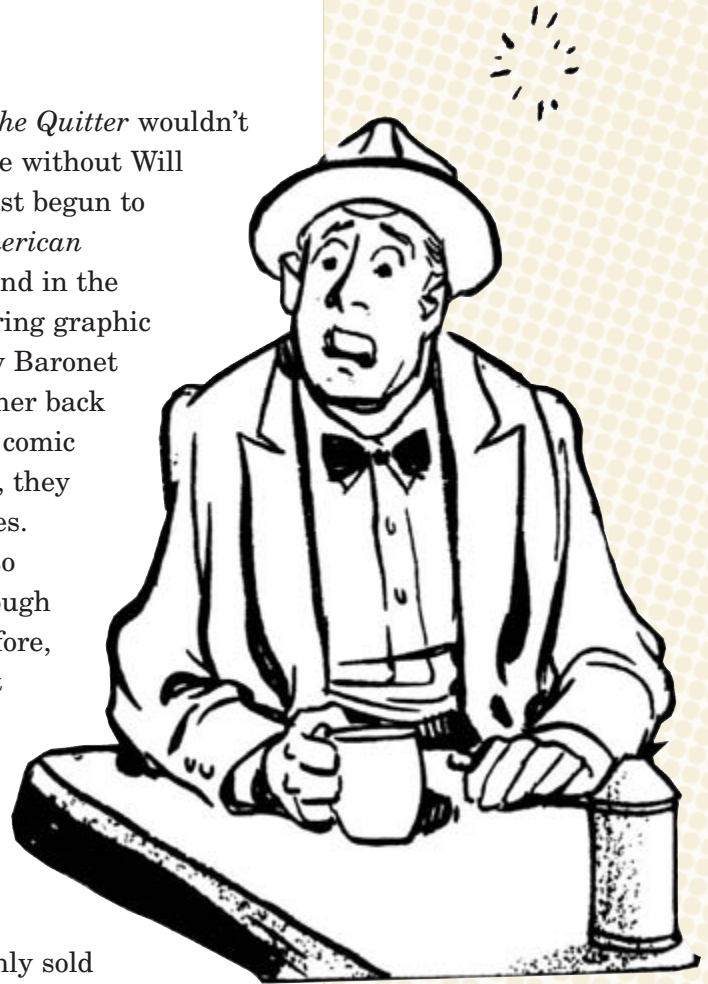
comics, cartoons, and humorous illustrations for corporate and educational use. His clients included RCA Records, General Motors, and the Baltimore Colts. He continued his work with American Visuals long after *The Spirit* ended, and he thought that his comics career was over. He had said what he had to say with *The Spirit,* and besides, his work as a commercial illustrator was profitable. But he didn't count on being rediscovered by comic-book fans. And they wanted to see more stories from this venerable storyteller.

Another catalyst of Eisner's return to comics was that by the early 1970s, American Visuals was going broke. Eisner left the company in 1972, and he had to think of what to do next. At that same convention in 1971, Eisner met Denis Kitchen, an underground cartoonist and the publisher of Kitchen Sink Press, who was a huge fan of his work. Later that same year, two issues of a comic book reprinting *Spirit* strips were published; the book was called *Kitchen Sink Underground Spirit.* In April 1974, Warren Publishing—famous for EC-style horror titles like *Creepy, Eerie,* and *Vampirella*—started reprinting *The Spirit.* In 1976, the reprint rights reverted back to Kitchen Sink, which published *Spirit* reprint comics until it stopped publishing comics in 1999 (Denis Kitchen now runs the Kitchen & Hansen
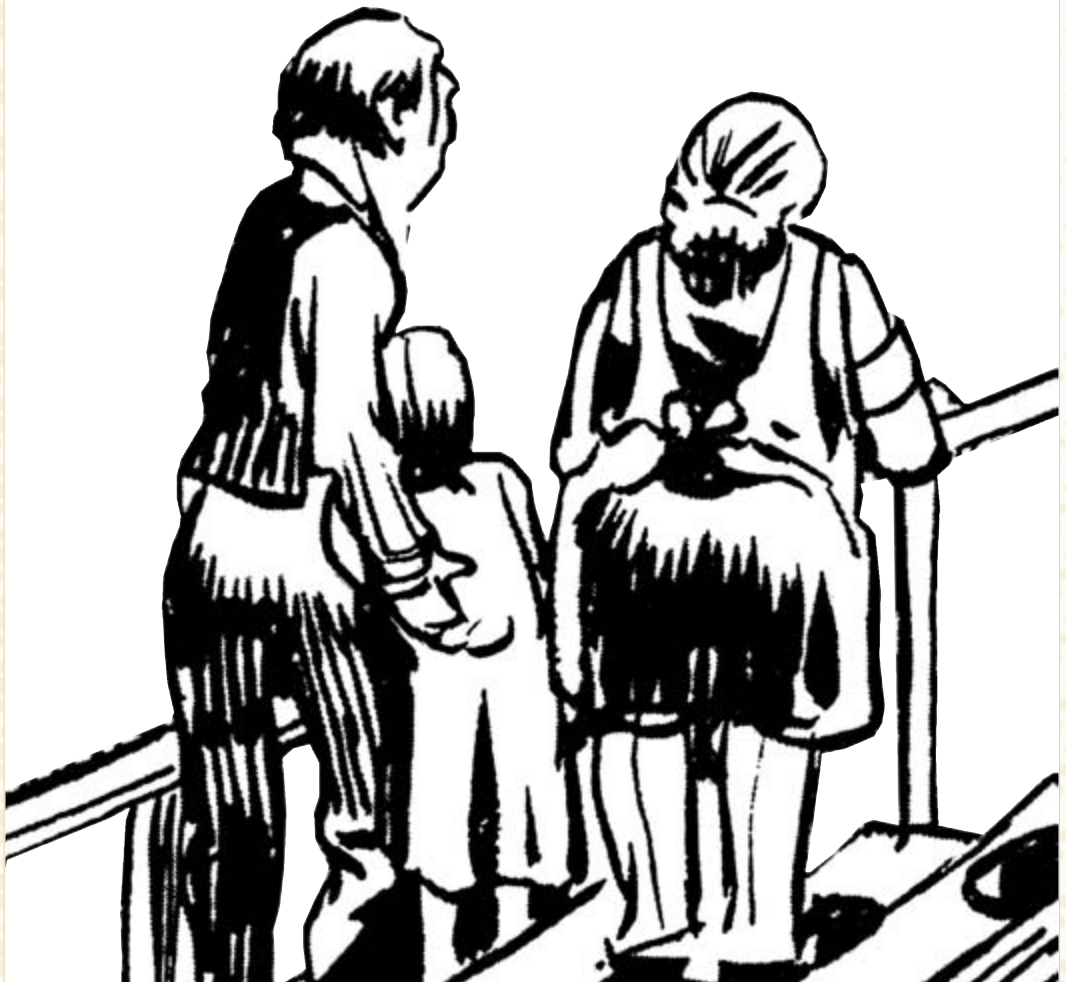
Agency, which represents cartoonists and manages the late Eisner's estate). With those first Kitchen Sink reprint comics in 1971, Eisner found that he was still a potentially marketable comics commodity. But he didn't want to do any new *Spirit* adventures; he wanted his next project to be different, the next step in his artistic evolution.

Ever since 1938, when he had shown an interest in the woodcut novels of Lynd Ward, Eisner had toyed with the idea of developing a serious work in comics form. Starting in the 1950s, he started privately sketching out ideas for a more ambitious comics project. At that time, however, such an idea would have been derided by publishers, who considered comics for children only. Many of his colleagues agreed with this assessment. Around 1960, Eisner went to a meeting of the National Cartoonists Society at what is now the Society of Illustrators on East 63rd Street in Manhattan. There, he met the legendary *New York Sun* editorial cartoonist Rube Goldberg, famous for his "Rube Goldberg machines" that complete simple tasks—such as flicking off a light switch—in hilariously complicated ways. (The breakfast scene in *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* is an homage to Goldberg's work.) Eisner told Goldberg—by then a very old man—about his work on *The Spirit* and his theory that the comics medium is an art form, to which Goldberg reportedly barked, "Bullshit, boy! You are a vaudevillian like the rest of us. It's just vaudeville, just plain vaudeville; don't ever forget that!"

Despite such harsh words, Eisner was undeterred, and in 1978, on noticing that underground comix had garnered some critical respect, he published a collection of four stories set in the Bronx ghetto of his youth. It was called *A Contract with God.* Eisner dubbed the work a "graphic novel." He wasn't the first to use the term, which had been floating around the fringes of the comics medium since the mid-1960s, but he popularized it. And by using his clout as a "grand old man" of comics to champion the use of long-form, ambitious, adult-oriented comics as a medium for personal expression, he paved the way for subsequent graphic novels like *Maus* and *The Quitter.* Eisner was also one of the first comic-book artists to get his work into major bookstores like Brentano's, rather than just comic-book stores, thus affording *A Contract With God* a larger audience than other comic books. Eisner would publish a total of 18 other graphic novels by the time of his death in 2005.

A Contract with God, a total departure from Will Eisner's more superheroic work during the Golden Age, is a dramatically resonant piece. The title story concerns Frimme Hersh, a pious Hasidic Jew

Will Eisner's 1979 graphic novel *A Contract with God* is composed of four interlocking tales, most of them dealing with Jewish characters.

who—as a child—had carved on a stone tablet a "contract with God," to which he attributes his lifelong lucky streak. He had been told early on in life that "God will reward you" for acts of kindness, and therefore he is furious at God for allowing his adopted daughter Rachele to die of a sudden illness. Accusing God of "violat[ing] our contract," Frimme disavows the contract and, with it, his faith. A now hardened and miserly Frimme shaves his beard and becomes a callous real estate mogul, living in a penthouse uptown with his mistress, "a 'shikseh' from Scranton, PA." He buys the tenement at 55 Dropsie Avenue where he lived when he was a modest Torah scholar, buying the property with bonds that were not his; they were entrusted to him for safekeeping by his synagogue. This subterfuge would have been unthinkable to the *old* Frimme Hersh, but the *new* Frimme Hersh has broken his "contract with God." Soon he realizes that he's an empty shell of a man … what can fill it? Certainly not wealth, not power, not sex, all of which Frimme has in ample supply. He goes to his synagogue and begs the rabbis to cobble together a new "contract with God," reasoning that he made the old one when he was a stupid child, and that these learned men of God will put together a more valid contract. After much debate the rabbis grant his request. Shortly afterward, Frimme is alone in his penthouse, planning his new life in which he will finally be happy thanks to his new contract … when his heart gives out. Frimme learns the hard way that life is not a simple system of checks and balances, rewards and punishments. God moves according to a mysterious alchemy, and it's best not to try and manipulate or anticipate that alchemy.

The story "A Contract with God" is a fascinating meditation on the eternal question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" This is certainly a question that Jewish people in general have asked in the wake of horrors like the Nazi Holocaust, and it's a question that Eisner himself asked when his 16-year-old daughter Alice died of leukemia in 1970. This tragic event was the impetus for Eisner's creation of "A Contract with God" and the character of Frimme Hersh, who grapples with the death of a young daughter. Eisner's normal response to any tragedy was to immerse himself in his work, to use comics as a kind of art therapy. The resulting story is among the most moving and dramatically resonant of Eisner's career.

The title story in *A Contract with God* also has something in common with the three others that make up that seminal 1978 work; they all concern Jews in some way or another. The second story, "The Street Singer," is about an aging opera diva, Marta Maria, who seduces a young alcoholic in a vain attempt to make him her protégé. From her

In this image from *To the Heart of the Storm*, the young Will Eisner is crushed to learn that one of his childhood friends has become an anti-Semite.

exotic name and larger-than-life persona, we assume Marta is Italian. But when Marta gets her manager on the phone, her veneer cracks: we see her desperation, and it's also revealed that her real name is the distinctly Jewish-sounding "Sylvia Speegel." Here Eisner is playing with the tradition of Jewish entertainers changing their names and putting on exotic personas. The next story, "The Super," is a disturbing tale about a building superintendent named Mr. Scuggs, who speaks in a German-inflected dialect. After talking to a Mr. Levinsky, Scuggs mutters to himself, "Yah! … Back in Chermany, things is different! There, they haf respect! … Soon, someday we will have discipline here too! Yah, it's coming … Ordnung!" Scuggs is clearly a Nazi sympathizer who despises his Jewish tenants. A more creepy character one couldn't imagine; the sexually frustrated loner is soon tricked out of his money box by a little girl, whom the slimy reprobate desperately longs for. It's a brutal, uncompromising story of dismal people eking out a miserable life.

Then there's the final story, "Cookalein," in which a working-class Jewish family flees the humid city life for a vacation in "the Mountains." It's a story about people trying to escape the dinginess of their surroundings by pretending to be who they aren't. The family's eldest son, Willie, pretends to be older so that he might attract the attention of Mrs. Minkus, a middle-aged married woman. Goldie, the naive young receptionist at Pinkus Furs who is also vacationing in the Mountains, puts on airs and pretends to be the daughter of a wealthy family so that she can land a rich man. Before long she is raped by an animalistic Lothario who feels duped that she isn't the person she says she was, but soon afterward she finds love with an earnest medical student she had spurned earlier.
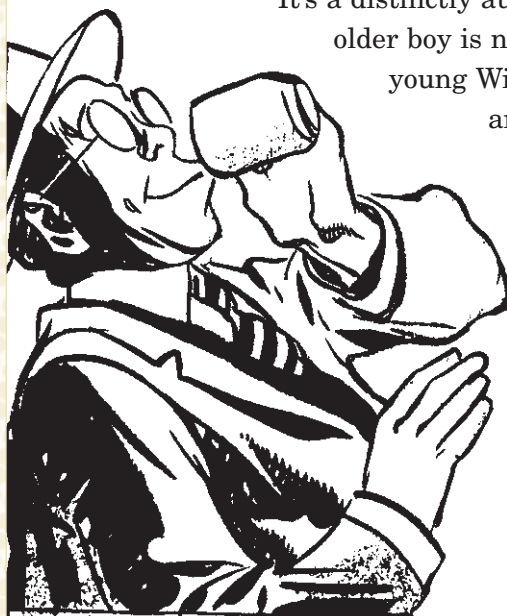
It's a distinctly autobiographical tale, as the family's older boy is named Willie and looks much like a young Will Eisner. The other family members are named after Eisner's parents and younger brother. In this way, "Cookalein" can be seen as a direct predecessor to Eisner's 1991 graphic novel *To the Heart of the Storm,* an intergenerational tale that weaves together various themes, including anti-Semitism and family obligation. Willie's parents in "Cookalein," Sam and Fanny, have the same

names and the same noxious relationship as the parents in *To the Heart of the Storm,* a book that Eisner described as "frankly autobiographical." The main difference between the two works is that "Cookalein" is at times a bit more cartoony, as in the treatment of Willie's younger brother Pete (named after Eisner's brother), who is treated here as comic relief. It's almost as though Eisner was working out ideas even in this earlier piece that he planned to revamp and expand later.

Just as the 1960s were a time of great turbulence in the world at large, so they were in the comic-book industry. Accepted notions of what was "appropriate" material for a comic book were redefined. The 1960s forked off into two areas. In the mainstream comics industry, Marvel Comics' Stan Lee and Jack Kirby pioneered in the development of the "regular guy" superhero (e.g., Spider-Man), the "outsider" superhero (e.g., the X-Men), and the anti-hero superhero (the Hulk). Meanwhile, in the underground, Jewish subject matter was explored for the first time through artists and writers like Diane Noomin, Trina Robbins, Art Spiegelman, and Aline Kominsky. The X-Men scribe Chris Claremont created some of the first openly Jewish superheroes and villains of the 1970s, and Will Eisner popularized the graphic novel format with 1978's *A Contract with God.* Meanwhile, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* gave comic books some much-needed critical respect.

But by the late 1970s, underground comix were history and superheroes once again dominated the medium. Unless you liked writing and drawing stories about spandex-clad demigods, you didn't have anywhere to publish. Those interested in telling more intimate, personal, realistic stories—or those who simply wanted to own the rights to their own superhero characters—had to find alternate venues. Thus was born what is now known as the Bronze Age of Comics, so called not because it's less esteemed than the Golden or Silver Ages, but because it reflects the raw, often bleak world in which we live. In fact, the word "Raw" would have much to do with the coming of the Bronze Age.

Part Three The Bronze Age

FROM COMIX TO GRAPHIX
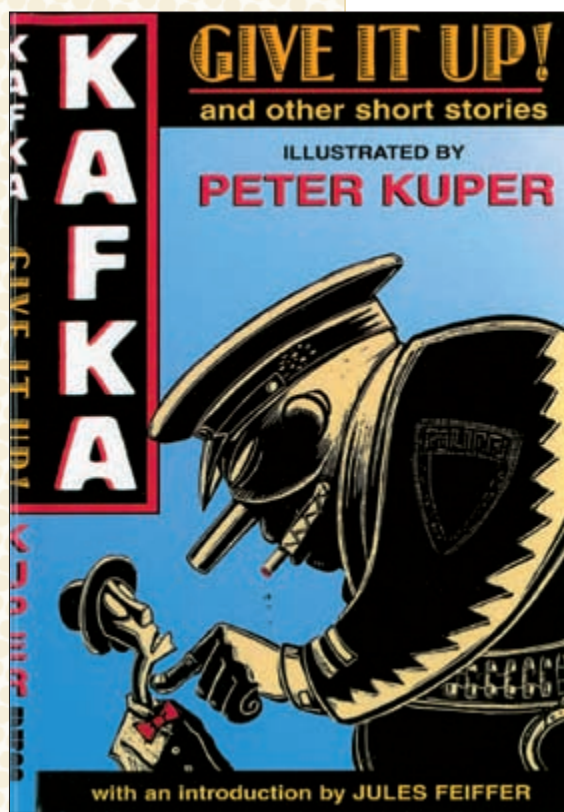
One of the Peter Kuper's adaptations of the works of the celebrated Jewish Writer Franz Kafka. Kuper's moody figures perfectly complement Kafka's prose.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, alternative newspapers like *The Berkeley Barb* and underground comix anthologies like *Arcade* were an excellent forum for politically themed comic strips. However, as the '70s gave way to the '80s, most undergrounds had shuttered their doors and overtly political newsweeklies were few and far between. In 1979, frustrated by the lack of outlets for political comics, the cartoonists Peter Kuper and Seth Tobocman introduced *World War 3 Illustrated,* a self-published comics magazine committed to the pursuit of social justice through comics. "With the hostage crisis in Iran, the threat of nuclear war, and Ronald Reagan running for president," said Kuper, "*World War 3 Illustrated* seemed like an appropriate title."

The cover of *World War 3*'s first issue featured a Coke bottle in the shape of a missile about to be launched into the skies; according to Kuper it symbolized "the exporting of our culture." This sight gag, rife with social satire, also sent a message to the reader that this was one comics magazine that wasn't pulling any punches. A prime example of *WW3*'s provocative strips is the *New Yorker* illustrator Erik Drooker's strip, "Jew Black Jew Black Jew Black Jew Black Jew Black" (from *WW3* #18, 1993), which compared the struggles of Jews in Nazi Germany to the current struggles of ghettoized African Americans. The strip came on the heels of the Crown Heights riots of August 1991, which were sparked when a seven-year-old Guyanese boy was accidentally run over by a Jewish man, accelerating the already tense relationship between the black and Jewish communities that populated the area. In Drooker's strip, he points out that "Jewish people have 'made it' in America. For the time being they are treated as honorary whites—but this can always change …. Meanwhile, they find themselves pitted against African-Americans who are totally fed up with the double standard of justice. I wonder what the future holds … will we see each other as potential allies—or be blinded by rage?"

Other Jewish cartoonists have also used *World War 3* to draw parallels between the Jewish experience and that of other peoples. Tobocman's 2002 entry, "A Land with 2 Peoples" (from *WW3* #33), in which Tobocman, who spent 2002 in Ramallah teaching art classes to Palestinian children, emphasized the similarities between Israelis and Palestinians. "Israelis and Palestinians are 2 communities at war," the final page's narration intones. "But they are communities. They love their children, look after their neighbors, and participate in civil society. On my 1st day in Jerusalem, I sat in front of Damascus Gate sketching. Arab kids crowded around to get their portraits drawn. As the tiny bodies pressed in around me, I caught myself looking to see if they had bombs strapped to their stomachs. That's when I realized how much I had been brainwashed by the media." The strip has sparked controversy among some Jewish readers, who felt that Tobocman was sympathizing with the Arab cause. But a closer reading of "A Land With 2 Peoples" will reveal that Tobocman takes no sides, and—aside from that final, copy-heavy page—the captions are minimal, such as "These are Jews" and "A Palestinian cab driver. His brother lives in New York City." It's Tobocman's way of saying, "How can we stop killing each other?" "A Land with 2 Peoples" was later included in Tobocman's collection *Portraits of Palestinians and Israelis: For My Parents,* published in 2003 by Soft Skull Press.

Peter Kuper is also no stranger to controversy. In 2003, he published a *World War 3 Illustrated* strip "Richie Bush," which depicted George W. Bush as the famous kids' comic-strip character Richie Rich. The following year, "Richie Bush" was reprinted in the Top Shelf Productions comics anthology *Stripburger,* which contained comics by foreign cartoonists as well as their stateside counterparts. The anthology was confiscated by U.S. customs officials. The letter that U.S. Customs sent to Top Shelf said that "Richie Bush" consistuted a "clearly piratical" copy of a registered and recorded U.S. trademark (Richie Rich). Kuper had to explain to the Customs office that he was in fact an American cartoonist (as opposed to a foreign artist mocking our president), and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund retained counsel to challenge the seizure. (Of course, if it were illegal to either lampoon the president or satirize a beloved children's comic strip, *MAD* would have gone out of business immediately.)

Kuper traces his social conscience to his parents. "My parents marched against the Vietnam War in the early '60s," said Kuper, "so it was a natural transition." He also feels that *World War 3 Illustrated* presents comics that have artistic and literary merit, but he does get tired of people putting labels on comics as opposed to

When Jack Kirby created Captain Victory in 1981, it was the first time he owned the right to one of his own characters.

other types of art: "The distinction [between comics and fine art] I find to be totally unnecessary. In the world of books it's important to define cartoon art as some form of lower art versus some higher form in a museum. That's just malarkey! There's no such thing. That's defined by people who feel the need to make those definitions."

Along with newer comic-book companies like Fantagraphics Books, WaRP Graphics, First Comics, Pacific Comics, Aardvark-Vanaheim, and Dark Horse Publishing, *World War 3 Illustrated* formed the vanguard of what would come to be known as "independent comics" or the "alternative comics press." Dozens of independent publishers sprang up, some debuting works by neophytes such as Dave Sim, the creator of *Cerebus;* others featured the work of established comics pros like Jack Kirby. In 1981, Kirby, for the first time in his career, created a character, Captain Victory, that he himself owned, a character that was not the property of Marvel or DC.

If Captain Victory, who debuted in Pacific Comics' space adventure saga *Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers* #1, looked oddly familiar to longtime Kirby fans, there was a reason. The character was originally designed by the legendary artist-writer as the son of Orion in his Fourth World line for DC. But when the Fourth World titles were prematurely canceled, Kirby took the previously unpublished character designs to Pacific, where Captain Victory finally saw print. Remember, Kirby employed a similar strategy with the Fourth World stories, which were originally planned as an offshoot of his *Mighty Thor* stories. And if one reads Lee's and Kirby's 1960s run on *Thor,* then Kirby's 1970s DC Fourth World saga, and then his *Captain Victory* chronicles, they do come together as one big story in three parts: Old Gods, New Gods, and Future Gods. Pacific only lasted two more years, having been outshone by the glossier Marvel and DC. But by attracting mainstream comics veterans like Kirby, Steve Ditko (who created Pacific's *Missing Man*), and Dave Stevens (who created *The Rocketeer*), Pacific proved that letting superhero creators own the rights to their characters was in some ways a bigger lure than a Marvel/DC-size paycheck.

In later years, Marvel's Epic line and DC's Pirhana Press imprint would offer creator-owned titles to appease comic-book pros hesitant to surrender control of their characters. But the independents like

Pacific did it first. These days, "indie" publishers like Dark Horse, Image, and Fantagraphics continue that tradition, offering a home for creators specializing in either commercial superhero fare or edgy autobiographical comics. And today, DC and Marvel even offer creator-owned titles through their respective Vertigo and Icon lines. But companies like Pacific weren't the only type of non-mainstream publishers to usher in the 1980s. That decade also saw the return of the avant-garde comics anthology.

In 1980, Art Spiegelman and his wife, Françoise Mouly, took the comics anthology magazine genre to new heights. Comics anthologies were a format Spiegelman had pioneered in the 1970s when he co-edited *Arcade* with Bill Griffith. However, after the commercial failure of *Arcade*, Spiegelman thought he was done with that type of magazine. His wife convinced him to reconsider.

Their brainchild, *RAW,* a self-described "graphix" magazine (the label "comix" was then associated with drugs and sex), sought to blur the distinction between comics and fine art. "I guess we never believed in the division between high and low," Spiegelman said. "So, [*RAW*] came specifically from wanting comics to be able to do whatever they were capable of doing." The cover of *RAW* #1, by Spiegelman himself, boasted a full-color "tipped-in" image glued by hand onto the black and white cover. *RAW* #7, subtitled "The Torn-Again Graphix Magazine," featured a cover (also by Spiegelman) where the right-hand cover was torn off, but each copy of the magazine was torn by hand, and thus was slightly different. Therefore, each copy was unique, an original work of art. "We were both, Françoise and I, interested in books for their objectness as well as their content," Spiegelman explained. "The way they just felt tactilely, what kind of paper they were on, what they were!"

Adding to the magazine's "high art" image was the inclusion of works by several European cartoonists like Joost Swarte of the Netherlands and Jaques Tardi of France, as well as edgy artwork from the political cartoonist Sue Coe (*How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*), the retro stylist Charles Burns (*Big Baby*), and the "King of Punk Art" Gary Panter (*Jimbo*). Established underground cartoonists such as Robert Crumb still made the occasional appearance, but the spotlight was given to newer talent, including the Jewish artists Drew Friedman and Ben Katchor. Typical of *RAW*'s sharp-edged social criticism was Friedman's parody of *The Andy Griffith Show* (from *RAW* #1), which depicted how an African American motorist might have been treated had he driven through

Drew Friedman, New York, 2007.

MAD **and** *Raw* **contributor Drew Friedman has devoted much of his career to chronicling the lives of Jewish comedians from the Golden Age of Hollywood.**

a real southern town in the 1950s, not the gentle, sanitized Mayberry depicted on TV. The piece was obviously meant as a commentary on racism rather than and endorsement of racism. But did it offend anyone? "Well, more people might've thought it than said it," answered Friedman. "But I read a few things where people did not get the point we were trying to make, which maybe even wasn't that much of a point. We were just placing a black guy in Mayberry and we wanted to see what would happen. But most people sort of took it for what it was, that it was a commentary about TV shows in the '60s and racism in the '60s and the *Andy Griffith Show* itself. The fact that there was never a black guy on [the show]. I think one time there was a light-skinned black guy on there who was Opie's football coach, in like the late '60s; I guess that was their response to Martin Luther King's assassination."

Could Friedman tell how influential *RAW* would be for the world of comics? "I had a feeling it was gonna be something special," he admitted. "And I was really flattered that he [Spiegelman] asked me to be part of it. I was a student in his class at [Manhattan's] School of Visual Arts at that time and so were [fellow cartoonists] Mark Newgarden and Kaz. And he asked the three of us to contibute to his new magazine. So we were incredibly glad. And I was sort of surprised because I wasn't really getting along with him that well as a teacher-student relationship. But then he asked me to be in *RAW* and we became a lot friendlier! It was exciting, and I had been a fan of his work and also a follower of *Arcade* magazine. And some of the other stuff he had done, like his work at Topps [designing trading cards]. So I knew all about him, and then when he was talking about launching this hip new wave comics magazine, in a larger format, I was thrilled to be part of it." Drew Friedman was associated with *RAW* from beginning to end: "I worked throughout its run. Which I guess the last three issues were smaller paperbacks published by Penguin in the early '90s."

At the time he started working on comics for *RAW,* Drew Friedman was part of a new generation of cartoonists—including Newgarden (*The Little Nun*), Kaz (*Underworld*), and Peter Bagge (*Hate*)—who began their careers as students at the School of Visual Arts. At SVA,

From Drew Friedman's book *Old Jewish Comedians*, his dead-on caricature of Jack Benny, born Benny Kubelsky.
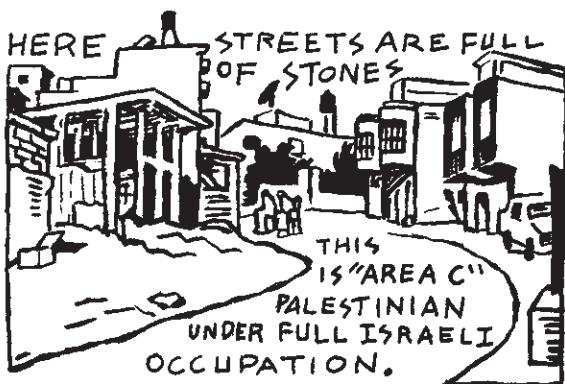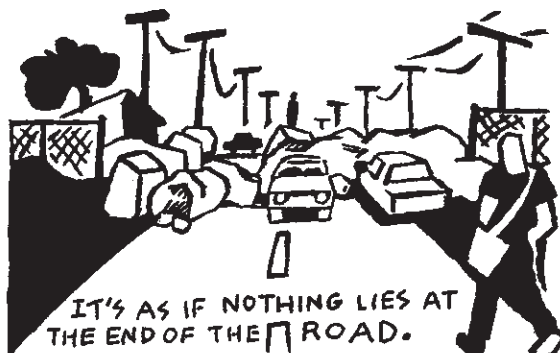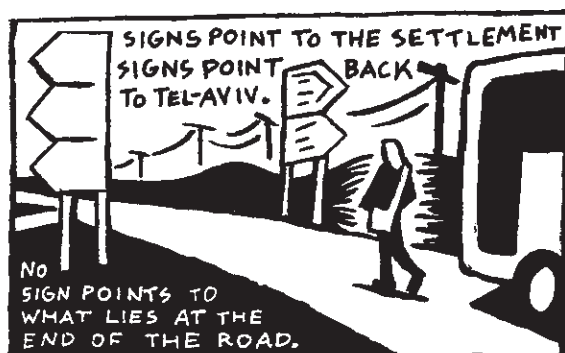
World War Three Illustrated, a defiantly political comics magazine created by Paul Kuper and Seth Tobocman, never shirks from exploring hot-button issues like the situation in the Middle East.

these future cartooning masters were taught by both underground legends like Spiegelman and Golden Age masters like Will Eisner and Harvey Kurtzman. Friedman had even previously published the Andy Griffith strip in Kurtzman's student-run SVA magazine, *Kar-Tunz*. But Friedman will freely admit that he wasn't the best behaved student, nor was he in awe of these cartooning legends who were his teachers. "No, not at all," he laughs today. "Harvey was a really sweet guy and Eisner was a real sweet guy. When I saw their names listed in the actual SVA brochures, I was blown away. When you think about that [faculty] roster, aside from Spiegelman, Eisner, and Kurtzman, there was Arnold Roth [of *New Yorker* fame] and Stan Mack [the creator of *Stan Mack's Real Life Funnies*]. Some were teaching [at night], during the night school. But most during the day school. Because the guy who was the head of the department, [the legendary illustrator] Marshall Arisman, was bringing these guys in. And he had a lot of pull. But then, when you actually encounter them face to face, when you're just sitting in the classroom, … the class I was in with Eisner, I think there was *one* other student in there. And they just become like *people,* you know? I guess I wasn't an angelic student. Basically, the School of Visual Arts was like the 13th grade, in a way. I'm not sure that I was really a hard-ass student, so I went in knowing what I wanted to do and they didn't teach me much. I got some tips from them and stuff, but I was a hard nut to crack. I was already doing my [pointillism] style when I was taking those classes. So, there wasn't much that they could really teach me, aside from just talking about some of their experiences, which was great to hear about."

Drew Friedman's caricature of Rodney Dangerfield, a comedian who combined old school Borscht Belt humor with the raunchiness of more contemporary comedy.

Friedman was also disillusioned about one of his teacher's attitudes about comics: "Harvey Kurtzman was focused on single-panel gag cartoons, and not comic-strip work. I never understood why. He thought the *New Yorker* cartoon was the epitome of cartooning, whereas comic-strip work and comic-book work was sort of beneath [that]. He always wanted to be involved with magazines and periodicals, and he wanted to get away from comic books. You look at the book he put out every year, *Kar-Tunz,* with all his students' work, it was those little one-panel cartoons, and there were only a couple of comic strips in there. The best thing about being with those guys was just being in their aura. It was just fun to hang out with Harvey
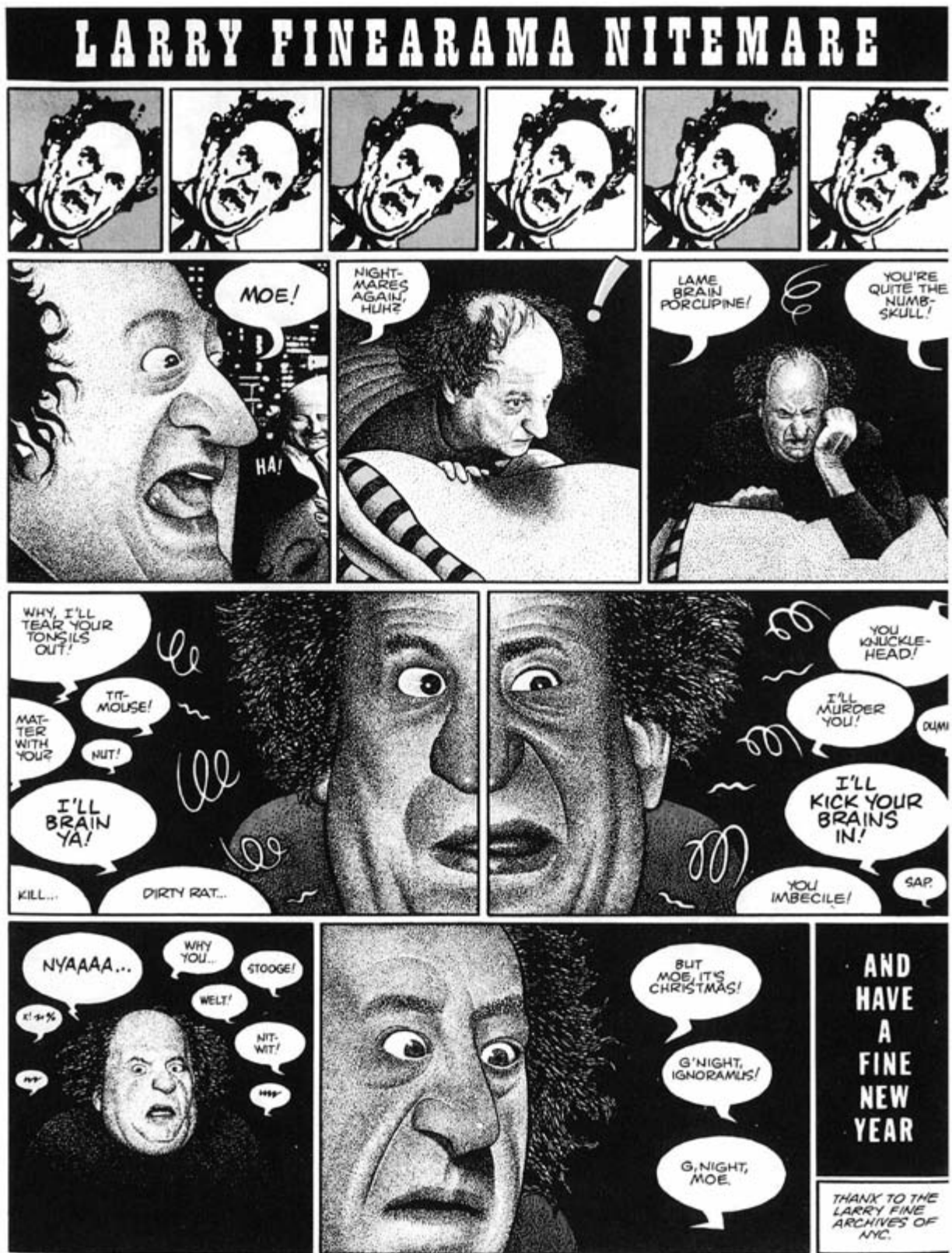
Drew Friedman's strip "Larry Finerama Nitemare" probes the subconscious turmoil of the Three Stooges Larry Fine.

Kurtzman and go to the bar with him after classes. Just being around them was like, … it was great."

Kurtzman may have felt that comic books were beneath other forms of art, but Spiegelman was consistently proving his mentor wrong with *RAW Magazine*. From its first issue in 1980, *RAW* was a success. The initial print run of 5,000 copies sold out, and sales ballooned to 35,000 copies by 1987 with issue #8—an impressive record for a small press magazine with virtually no advertising or PR budget, relying solely on word of mouth to boost sales. Well received in art and graphics circles, *RAW* took non-mainstream comics to a new level of artistic respectability. Eschewing the overwhelmingly political bent of *World War 3 Illustrated, RAW* championed personal artistic expression and inspired the creation of several critically respected comics anthology magazines, including Monte Beauchamp's *Blab!* and Dark Horse's *Cheval Noir*. And as Spiegelman points out, "I think *RAW* had a big impact over the years, in terms of establishing certain artists in the world, and even in terms of getting more 'normal' publishers like DC or Marvel to pay attention to their production values."

The current crop of alternative cartoonists uniformly point to *RAW* as having inspired them in childhood. "*RAW* had a huge, huge impact on me," recalled the cartoonist/illustrator Leela Corman (*Bizarro World, Sexy Chix*). "That was like a turning point in my life. I was a teenager when it came out, and I was working in a bookstore. [*RAW*] was like a creative atom bomb, falling out of the sky. The first one I saw was *RAW* Volume 2, issue one, when it started coming out again in the late '80s [after a hiatus]. It was a small paperback *RAW,* and it was the first time I saw [anything by] Spiegelman, and [Robert] Sikoryak, and Kaz, and all these good French cartoonists."

THE MAUS THAT ART BUILT

Art Spiegelman's single greatest achievement in *RAW* was publishing his refined and reworked version of *Maus,* which had come far since its early days as a three-page strip in *Funny Aminals.* Spiegelman utilized the cartooning convention of anthropomorphized animals—Jews were depicted as mice, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, and Nazis as cats—in telling the story of his father's Holocaust experience. "In doing that three-page strip," Spiegelman remembered, "I realized that I had a lot of unfinished business." So, starting in 1978, Spiegelman began interviewing his father, Vladek, and over the next three years he had collected enough material to write and illustrate the story of his father's survival and its impact on his own psyche. Spiegelman immediately conceived *Maus* as a long-form work, something with the scope of a novel: "What I wanted to make was something I'd thought about as a result of reading '60s fanzines, like *Graphic Story Magazine.* And in there there was a discussion of [early 20th-century Belgian woodcut master Frans] Masereel, and people like that. And the idea that there could be such a thing as the Great American Novel, but in comics form, was a notion that I vaguely remember seeing there, and it corresponded with something I wanted!"

Starting with *RAW* #2, the first six chapters of *Maus* appeared in *RAW* from 1980 to 1985. These six chapters would be collected in the 1986 graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale.* But *Maus*'s journey from *RAW* to chain bookstores wasn't an easy one. After the first few chapters of *Maus* were serialized in *RAW,* Spiegelman began looking for a publisher. He waded through dozens of rejection letters—until, finally, Pantheon made him an unusual offer: the publisher agreed to proceed only if the completed work came out that very year. It was a curious demand, Spiegelman thought, as he had only completed the first volume of the overall work, and that portion had taken eight years. Then he learned that an article had appeared in the *New York Times Book Review,* which "talked about this work in progress in comics form that was the important literary achievement of our age—astonishing coverage given the fact that the *Times Book Review* never covered works in progress and certainly never comics-related material." Spiegelman would have been happy waiting until he had finished the
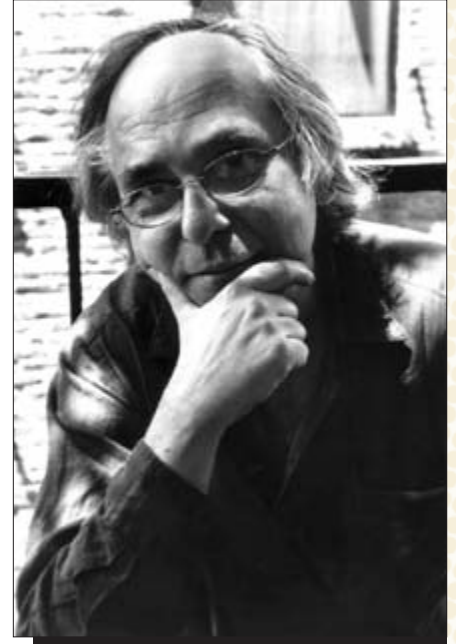
Nadja Spiegelman © 2005.

To this day, Art Spiegelman is the only graphic novelist to win the Pulitzer Prize.

whole saga and collecting it all into one big book, but then he heard about a certain animated movie that was already in development: "I was very upset to learn about what would become *An American Tale,* which I'm quite sure was inspired by *Maus*. I didn't want to have my book come out after some giant Spielberg-produced, feature-length animation; I didn't want to be perceived as a twisted version of Spielberg's more delightful and innocent use of mice as Jews. And so I really wanted my book to come out before this film was finished. The only way to do it would be to publish part one immediately, rather than wait till I'd finished part two, which would have been years more. At first Pantheon said, 'Forget it,' but once requests for the book started coming in as a result of the *Times Book Review* piece, they said yes, and then quickly put it out."

The critical acclaim that *Maus* received from the mainstream press was unprecedented in the American comics industry. Along with the seminal graphic novels *Watchmen* (written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons) and *Dark Knight Returns* (written/drawn by Frank Miller), *Maus* is considered one of the troika of works that did the most to demystify the comics medium for the adult public in the 1980s. Even more than *A Contract with God* or *To the Heart of the Storm, Maus* is easily the most famous Jewish-themed graphic novel ever published, which prompts the question: How influenced was Spiegelman by Eisner's work?

"I'd already been working on *Maus* when Will's first book came out," replied Spiegelman. "And I never wanted the phrase 'graphic novel' personally. I like the word 'comics' well enough. I mean, everything's a misnomer, so that was an acceptable one. I was interested in the fact that Eisner was working again, after a long eclipse, but it wasn't an influence on [*Maus*]. If anything, the *Contract with God* book, which was the one that was around after I decided, 'Okay, I'm moving toward this long book,' was really a collection of short stories, and what *I* wanted to make was something that pre-dates the Eisner stuff [in my mind]. And I'm not sure where the seed got planted, but basically, a lot for me had to do with just form. And the idea of a comic book long enough to need a bookmark. And dense enough in terms of its content so that it would be somewhere to the side of a quick laugh or escapist adventure, was something I'd been brooding over for a long time. So for the time *A Contract with God* was there, I liked it—especially that 'The Super' story. The story about the super and the little girl, I liked that one. And I'd admired *The Spirit* a lot. But 'influence' would be too strong, except maybe *The Spirit* was actually an influence on some of my early [pre-*Maus*] work."

However, Spiegelman did talk to Eisner while he was crafting *Maus,* getting feedback from the elder statesman of cartooning while he was putting together this seminal work. "Spiegelman came to see me [at one point]," Eisner recalled. "[It was] in the last couple of years of putting it together. It took him four years to put the book together. He did a massive amount of research and interviewing. He came down here in Florida to interview an aunt who was here, he stayed here overnight, and we talked about it. So the atmosphere was growing; what was happening was that an adult audience was beginning to appear. The same reasoning that I had in doing *A Contract with God.* The difference is that he selected a subject that had greater resonance than my story. The discussion of the Holocaust is a very powerful subject! I was talking about something far more intellectual, such as man's relationship with God, a totally different kind of thing. The subject itself didn't have the weight of a story about the Holocaust. Aside from the fact that [*Maus*] was a brilliant piece of work."

Spiegelman was motivated to finish *Maus* not by the inspiration of mentors like Eisner, but by his own inner demons, which he was continually forced to confront when working on this intensely personal project. Indeed, he was inspired not only by his father's personal story, but also by his dysfunctional relationship with his father, beginning in childhood. This made *Maus* a doubly difficult ordeal for Spiegelman. Adding to the turmoil, as a child of survivors it was anything but easy for Spiegelman to confront the horrors of the Holocaust on a regular basis. "The goal was to tell [Vladek's] story," Spiegelman said. "And at a certain point, I went to see a shrink who had been a Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz, who helped me get past some [mental] blocks

James Sturm's excellent graphic novel *The Golem's Mighty Swing* the gripping tale of a minor league Jewish baseball team in the Deep South during the 1920s.

into the second volume …. My shrink, he really liked the first book, and he was trying to get the second book out of me."

Vladek's second wife, Mala (also a Holocaust survivor), proved to be a frequent booster of Spiegelman's project. "Mala was very supportive [and would say], 'Oh! That's good that you're doing this!'" Still, he thinks that her attitude changed once the book was actually published. "I think she was a little bit more ambivalent when the book came out," Spiegelman noted, "and she was made into a sort of semi-public figure." Indeed, Mala appears in the book, in mouse form, alongside Spiegelman himself and Vladek. What did Vladek himself think about *Maus?* "For the most part, my father seemed to be unaware that I was making the book," Spiegelman mused. "He just liked the fact that I'd come by and hang out. So it was us hanging out with a tape recorder and we're talking about the death camps. And insofar as he had more of a response, it's sort of incorporated into *Maus,* this one page where I'm showing him some of what I did, and that was pretty much his reaction, as far as I knew. What I later heard from other people, he said, 'Oh yes, my son's making a book about me.' But I never heard that directly."

Maus's success would forever change how the world of arts and letters viewed comic books. The serious novel-length adult comic book had been attempted with varying degrees of success ever since Eisner's *A Contract with God.* These works, however, had rarely made it into chain bookstores; nor had any been awarded a Pulitzer Prize, as *Maus* was in 1992, the year after Part Two was published. In addition, *Maus*'s success would secure for graphic novels a niche in bookstores nationwide. "*Maus* saved non-superhero comics," Trina Robbins claimed. "Oh, it changed the industry enormously! I mean, I think graphic novels are the hope of comics. For one thing, you can

get them into libraries. I mean, libraries don't want these flimsy little pamphlet comics that fall apart, they want graphic novels that can stand up on a shelf with the books. And they're sold in bookstores! Especially, they're the hope for non-superhero comics. Because, [what] if the regular comic-book store won't carry your comic, or under-orders it severely because it's not a superhero book? But if you do it in graphic novel form, you've got a chance at the bookstores and the libraries."

The veteran comic-book writer/editor Paul Kupperberg (*Checkmate, Doom Patrol*) concurred that *Maus* was a watershed: "Suddenly comics didn't have to be guys in superhero costumes. They could be about real people, or mice *pretending* to be real people. It opened up the genre." But perhaps most importantly, *Maus* was a story that Jewish readers identified with on an intimate level. "In my family there are Holocaust survivors," Leela Corman remarked. "So *Maus* was a very personal thing to read for me."

Maus demonstrated what underground cartoonists like Spiegelman, Robbins, and Harvey Pekar had known for decades—that autobiographical comics about average, everyday people were not only an art form, but one that could strike a chord with the American public. Once graphic novels were proven a natural medium for explor- ing issues in a serious manner, Jewish comics creators increasingly utilized the format to explore Jewish history and identity. Without *Maus,* more recent graphic novels such as Ben Katchor's 1998 classic *The Jew of New York* (about an attempt in 1825 to establish a Jewish homeland in upstate New York), James Sturm's 2001 touchstone *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (about a Jewish-themed base- ball team in the 1920s that encounters anti-Semitism), and Miriam Katin's moving 2006 Holocaust memoir *We Are on Our Own* might not have been considered commercially viable.

Courtesy of Miriam Katin.

A self portrait of Miriam Katin, the writer/illustrator behind the acclaimed graphic novel *We Are on Our Own* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2006), a memoir recounting the struggle Katin and her mother faced while fleeing the Nazis during World War II.

A GRAPHIC APPROACH TO JEWISH HISTORY

**Will Eisner drawn
by Will Eisner.**

There was one artist who was using the graphic novel as a vehicle to tell Jewish stories long before Spiegelman published *Maus*. That artist was Spiegelman's mentor Will Eisner. As any serious comics collector knows, 1978's *A Contract with God* and 1991's *To the Heart of the Storm* are far from Eisner's only graphic novels to feature Jewish characters and themes. Eisner was the comic-book equivalent of the film director Barry Levinson (*Bugsy, Avalon, Liberty Heights*), in that he consistently told stories about the Jewish experience, no matter whether or not such stories were in vogue. He would even recount his early days in the comic-book industry in the 1986 graphic novel *The Dreamer,* which featured characters who were thinly veiled surrogates for the Jewish writers and cartoonists he had grown up with during comics' Golden Age, like Ken Corn (Bob Kane), Jimmy Samson (Jerry Iger), and Jack King (Jack Kirby). Why were the characters in so many of Eisner's books Jewish? "I understand Jews, and I like to write what I understand," he said. "I am not a promoter of Jewish culture. You might say I'm a Jewish Frank McCourt!" Eisner was—by his own admission—not a religious man, but he was drawn toward Jewish subject matter for much of his career as a graphic novelist. It's even in the title of his second-to-last book, 2003's *Fagin the Jew*.

Fagin the Jew tells the tale of *Oliver Twist* from the vantage point of Moses Fagin, the leader of a band of thieves in 19th-century England. "Charles Dickens contributed to the stereotyping of Jews," Eisner said. "He referred to Fagin as 'The Jew' throughout [early editions of] the book. I take exception to that." In truth, he asserts in the book's afterword, "[Dickens] never intended to defame the Jewish people … but he abetted the prejudice against them. *Oliver Twist* became a staple of juvenile literature, and the stereotype was perpetuated. Over the years, while teaching sequential art, my lectures invariably had to confront the issues of stereotype. I concluded that there was bad stereotype and good stereotype: intention was the key. Since stereotyping is an essential tool in the language of graphic storytelling, it is incumbent on cartoonists to recognize its impact on social judgment. The memory of their awful use by the Nazis in

World War II one hundred years later added evidence to the persistence of evil stereotyping. Combating it became an obsessive pursuit, and I realized that I had no choice but to undertake a truer portrait of Fagin by telling his life story in the only way I could."

Determined to humanize Fagin, Eisner crafted a backstory for the character, showing us how a sweet child is driven to desperate measures. Young Fagin's father is killed by anti-Semitic hoodlums and becomes increasingly hardened as he is victimized because of his Jewish and lower-class origins. "I am Fagin, a member of a dispersed but noble breed!" the protagonist proclaims. "Jews who are often forced by circumstance to survive in the foul frowsy dens and squalid misery of midnight London are *not* thieves by choice!" Along the way, Eisner touches on issues of assimilation (Mr. Isaac D'Israeli, a leader of England's Sephardic community, decides to have his children baptized because "as a gentile, my son Benjamin could one day become Prime Minister!") and Jewish pride (young Fagin watches the great Jewish boxer Daniel Mendoza defeat Joe Ward and hears his father exclaim, "Thank God!! Now all England will know that Jews can fight back!"). Eisner also portrays Fagin, hardened criminal that he is, as somehow still retaining the Jewish values and traditions he learned as a child: at the very end of his life, knowing he will soon be hanged before a cheering mob for a crime he did not commit, Fagin reveals to Oliver Twist the secret location of a long-buried locket, knowing that its contents will forever change the boy's life. Kneeling in prayer on a hard pavement, he recites *"Shema Yisroel Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echo,"* and proclaims to Oliver: "I give you a future."

The cartoonist/writer Joe Kubert also confronted anti-Semitism in his 2003 graphic novel *Yossel: April 19, 1943,* a fictional portrayal of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. As the story unfolds, young Yossel dreams of becoming a comic-book artist, but his life unravels when his

> **WILL EISNER'S** final graphic novel, *The Plot,* which was released posthumously in 2005, was the first comic book to explore the history of the anti-Semitic tract known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The Protocols* was a fabricated document purported to have been the blueprint of powerful Jewish leaders in their bid to conquer the globe. Through the marriage of words and pictures, Eisner shows how *The Protocols*, first published in 1905, has been used for the past century to justify anti-Semitic behavior across the world. Perhaps due to Eisner's advanced age at the time he was working on the book (he was, after all, 87), the book is less polished and more didactic than his other graphic novels—long stretches of text fill in narrative cracks where images would have sufficed, and the dialogue is sometimes too "on the nose." However, the work is gripping. And, like *Maus* and *We Are on Our Own, The Plot* points to comics' effectiveness in examining the most defining events in Jewish history.

Fagin the Jew, one of Will Eisners' last works, tells the story of Fagin, the Jewish criminal from Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist.*

parents are deported to a concentration camp and he is confined to the ghetto. Tens of thousands of Jews within the ghetto walls are killed, yet Yossel survives because he is able to amuse Nazi soldiers with his cartoon renderings of Aryan superheroes. He also uses his art as a way to escape the horrors of everyday life, as when he ponders the following sentiment while drawing: "I leaned on the suitcase and my pencil danced across the yellow, creased paper. At first, I thought of my cartoon heroes. Flash Gordon. Tarzan. Jungle Jim. The Phantom. Strong and powerful. *They* could beat the Nazis. *They* could take us from this awful place." Eventually Yossel meets up with the ghetto resistance leader Mordecai (modeled on Mordecai Anielewicz) and the two learn the horrible truth about the destination of those who are deported daily from the ghetto. They relay the news to the Jewish Council, but are dismayed by its conciliatory response: "We cannot afford to antagonize them"; "we must

A photo of Will Eisner taken later in life.

be patient … put our trust in God." Mordecai later proclaims: "We will not give up. We can fight. We can kill some of them. We can die like human beings."

Kubert, now a comic-book legend and the founder of the only accredited school devoted solely to the art of cartoon graphics, believes that Yossel's fate could have been his own had his family not left Poland for America in 1926, when he was only two months old. "The basis of the story," he commented, "is what would have happened had my parents decided not to come to the United States, but to stay in Europe. This is my 'what if' story, what my life would have been [like] as a young cartoonist in the Warsaw Ghetto." This "what if story" then takes on an extra dimension when one considers that the character of Yossel, who is happy only when drawing cartoons, is a surrogate for Joe Kubert himself. "My parents were born in Poland," Kubert explained. "I was born in Poland, I had an older sister who was two years older than myself, she was born there, and that was in 1926. By 1939, when the Holocaust really began in earnest, I was 13 years old, I was already doing [comic-book] work professionally here in the United States! My parents came to the United States in 1926, I was two months old at that time, simply

In Joe Kubert's graphic novel *Yossel: April 19, 1943*, the main character uses fanciful superhero imagery to help himself cope with the seriousness of his surroundings.

because my father felt that he wanted a place to rear his children that would give them more opportunities. Now, this was not because they were being put-upon. As a matter of fact my father's father had a business in Poland. My mother's father was a veterinarian; my parents were not running away from anything at that time. But my father felt, because he wanted more opportunities for his children, that he wanted to come to America! Now, I wonder what would have happened if they didn't leave at that time?

"Because we had gotten stories in the late '30s and early '40s, people who came from my folks's hometown, telling us what was happening over there, describing what was happening! They sounded like horror stories to me, but I didn't understand the full effect of what was happening. Then I put together this book *Yossel,* which incorporates the revolt which occurs when the Jews who were in Poland revolted against the Nazis, the fight that took place. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. And Yossel takes a part in it! This is something that might have happened [to me], had I stayed behind. I would still have been involved in drawing." Compared to most comic books and graphic novels, in which the pencil drawings are inked, in *Yossel,* the pencil drawings are laid bare with no ink overlay, for the audience to absorb the raw power of the pencil sketches, and thus the raw power of the events unfolding before them. "The book itself is done in such a way [that it's] not so much as a comic book," said Kubert. "It's different from anything I've done before. Because these are pencil drawings. These are drawings that are done, as if I was doing the sketches during that whole time!" And how much of *Yossel* is based on Kubert himself? "A lot of [the character] is based on perhaps the way I would've thought or felt," Kubert reflected. "It also includes some things about my parents and my sister at that time, had we stayed there."

The Jewish comics writer Judd Winick—who received a Pulitzer nomination for the graphic novel *Pedro and Me* (the story of his friendship with the late Pedro Zamora, a former roommate on MTV's *The Real World* who died of AIDS)—also draws from history in his series, *Caper,* a 12-issue series composed of three interlocking stories chronicling the fictional Weiss family from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. In each story, a different member of the Weiss family is trying to complete a "caper" of sorts, involving a murder, hence the series' title. "We follow the wife's family generation to generation," Winick noted. "We start right now in turn-of-the-century San Francisco, the next one is [set] in 1970s Hollywood, and the final one is in modern day San Francisco, coming back [full circle]. And it's three different artists with kind of three different

genres with each story. You know, one's a period piece called 'Market Street,' the second one is a period piece, but it's more like a '70s film, very talky. I'd say a law drama but we're never actually going to end up in the court room, although it's all about a lawyer. That one is called 'Hollywood Treatment,' and the third one is called 'On Ice.' And 'On Ice' is [done like] a ridiculous, over-the-top Coen brothers-style film."

In the first story, "Market Street" (which debuted in *Caper* #1, December 2003), savvy Jacob and his psychopath brother Izzy are serving as "Toppers" for "Boss" Josef Cohen, a stern yet paternal figure who takes them into his enclave after their father, a small time lender, is murdered. Boss Cohen owns a big chunk of the city (as the boys explain, "Our job is mostly to hurt people who forget that"), but that doesn't stop him from putting on the trappings of being a committed Jew who chastises Jacob and Izzy for not measuring up ("You're late, boys. Bad enough that you missed *shul,* but you show up late for the reception of my boy's bar mitzvah. And *underdressed.* I pay you gentlemen enough, I'd expect you could shop at a better haberdashery"). With the passage of time, Jacob and Izzy begin to realize that Boss Cohen is manipulating them and nearly everyone else in town—and they devise a caper to stop the man who has long served as their surrogate father.

"In the story there are no good guys," Winick pointed out. "Even the protagonists aren't good guys, and for them Judaism is more their culture than their religion. And the man who is supposedly the most pious man in the community [Boss Cohen] is the worst one by far! When you look at [stories about] the Italian mafia, these are the men who are supposedly good Catholics. How often do we get to portray Jews in these stories? I don't mean in a good or bad way. When we see Jews in gangster stories, they're always miserly, they're always accountants, they're diamond merchants, lawyers. But in this case, *they're* the gangsters, and they don't discuss what it is to be a Jew; it's just who they are."

And Winick is the first to admit that he took some liberties in telling the story of Jacob and Izzy Cohen and their hoodlum friends: "I've

The writer Judd Winick's DC Comics series *Caper* was a rarity in mainstream comics: a maxi-series (in 12 parts) that traced the history of a flawed (sometimes downright criminal) Jewish family. And yes, there are no capes or tights involved.

always been really interested in Murder Inc. I've always been interested in Jewish organized crime, and also, similarly, in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. It's sort of where fact and fiction collide. There were no gangs in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. And frankly, there's never been organized crime in San Francisco—a theory is that [that city is] so [ethnically] diverse that it really can't sustain one group over another, as far as [organized] crime goes. So, I borrowed liberally from the '20s and '30s and '40s of Murder Inc. and placed them here. Even dating it back a little bit further, like we're talking 1906, it's just this side of the Old West. And I sort of see Judaism as a culture being even further entrenched in their own culture. I mean, in the '20s and '30s Jews only mixed with Jews, so here I figured, it's almost exclusive." Like Eisner's portrayal of Fagin, Winick used "Market Street" to explore the effects of poverty and prejudice upon Jews who have come to the misguided conclusion that crime is the only viable path to financial and emotional survival. But as Winick observed, "This is not [a story] about redemption; it's about revenge." The story's stark, brutal illustrations, courtesy of Farel Dalrymple, bring this point home quite clearly.

By contrast, "Hollywood Treatment," *Caper*'s second story arc (which began in *Caper* #5, April 2004), is a dramatic change of pace. It is more a satire of '70s Hollywood and its excesses. To add to its "showbiz" feel, "Hollywood Treatment" was illustrated by John Severin, one of the original *MAD* artists and a master of celebrity caricature. In "Hollywood Treatment," we see that by now Jacob Weiss has moved to Los Angeles and become involved in the movie business. "But we don't follow him," Winick pointed out. "We come in two generations later with his granddaughter, who is a hotshot Hollywood lawyer. Her name is Anastasia Weiss, but everybody calls her Ann Weiss. She's actually a lawyer to the stars—you know, if someone gets involved with drugs, or something [seedy], she's the one who gets the big stars off. And there's a great inside joke that [Warner Bros.-owned DC Comics] let me do that Jacob goes and founds Weiss Brothers pictures, and the logo is exactly the Warner Bros. logo. You know, there's a little joke inside there, that Jacob really likes going to the movies, so he goes. He leaves San Francisco, goes to Hollywood and forms a motion picture company."

Winick feels that it's important to point out that because of the anti-Semitism of the early 20th century, Jews were forced to more or less create the movie business, just as they founded the comic-book industry: "The Jews founded Hollywood because they weren't allowed any place else. They had to create their own business, their own industry, so they went out and created Hollywood. That's factual! Go look at everyone who started the motion picture companies and it's Jewish businessmen, and they did it because they were all basically forced out, there was no other place for them to go into business so they had to create one. That's what Jacob does. So, we follow [his granddaughter] around this story; again, it's a Jewish protagonist; it almost has nothing to do with the story except who she is."

And just because "Hollywood Treatment" deals with a more assimilated generation of Jews than "Market Street," that doesn't mean that the characters' Judaism doesn't come into play. "Ann Weiss is married to a Jewish screenwriter," Winick said. "They've got two kids, they've got a family there. No, they're not strutting around talking Yiddish and it's not the genre of Jewish gangsters anymore. But something about the '70s movies always felt really Semitic to me, and it was probably because of the leading men. You know, it's all these great character actors with dark hair, and the stories are coming out of New York. And the people writing [movies in the 1970s] knew that, you know? There was an intellectualism with a lot of wonderful '70s movies, from [the director Sidney Lumet's film] *Dog Day Afternoon* to [Paddy Chayefsky's] *Network* to … you know, all the smartest stuff. *Serpico* [also Lumet] and all these films to me have the fingerprints of Jewish people working on them. So that's what this kind of genre is about, it's like one of those gritty '70s films. It's a gritty Hollywood tale mixed in [with] your basic 'crime of the century's [story]. A gigantic movie star is being accused of murder. That's the center of it. It's a very talky comic, it's the least action-heavy of the three, and to me it feels very Jewish because of the context I'm doing it in."

One of the major themes of "Hollywood Treatment" is the excess that was so much a part of the '70s movie scene, which has also been chronicled in books like Peter Biskind's *Easy Rider*s, *Raging Bulls*. "['Hollywood Treatment'] is predominantly about sex and drugs," Winick admitted. "It's about the underbelly. Basically it's about Ann Weiss, her husband, and then there's this other couple who are the ultimate ultimate Hollywood power couple. John Hawks is the biggest star in the world: a 'John Wayne meets Steve McQueen' type person who is a thinking man's action star. He's won Oscars, he's like
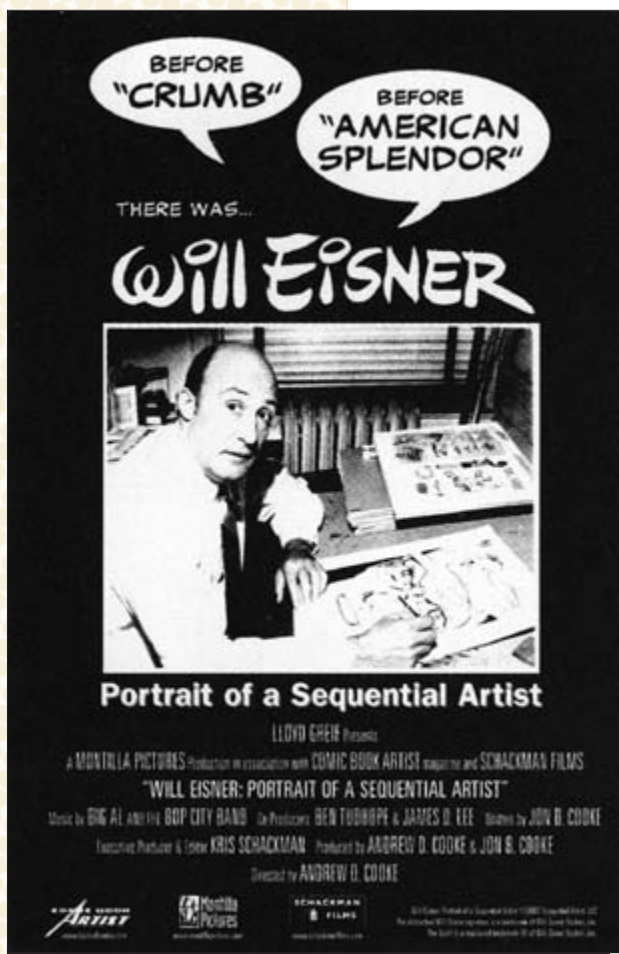
Will Eisner's impact is still being felt today, as a recent documentary on the late cartoonist makes clear.

the biggest star in the whole world. And he's married to the other biggest star in the whole world, [Debbie Ashley], who is this beautiful sexpot who's now become a serious actress, and she actually *can* act. They love each other, and they're not in the tabloids, and they've actually managed to make it work—until she winds up stabbed to death in their bed and it looks like John did it. So now the entire planet is now watching to see who's going to defend him—you know, his best friend—and the problem is, it *really* looks like he did it. So, Ann is sort of torn because it lookes like this man, the most beloved man, has brutally murdered his wife. And whether he's convicted or acquitted he's probably finished. What we also learn is that he does have an alibi—he was at an orgy with 12 other people! There's this massive underbelly that comes out about sex and drugs and it's all sort of spinning around [like] the [1920s] Fatty Arbuckle scandal. John Hawks knows that if it ever comes out, he's finished. And he'd rather roll the dice, being convicted or not, because either way he's done—the only thing he has is his career. So, this is the story, and it winds up with a great twist ending."

The "caper" in "Hollywood Treatment" presents itself when we learn that John *didn't* commit the murder, and the story then becomes about how Ann can possibly get him out of this mess without revealing his sordid past. "She's bound by privilege and he will not let her say [the truth]," Winick said. "And frankly, no one else at this orgy, who's also a bunch of Hollywood stars, would admit that they were there either to cover for him. No one can vouch for him because no one can admit that they were there. So it becomes a big mess, and while this is going on, there's a killer out there!"

The third story arc in *Caper,* "On Ice," is as complete a departure from "Hollywood Treatment" as that story arc was from "Market Street." In this story, set in the present (and illustrated with slapstick zaniness by Tom Fowler), Lou Weiss, the nephew of Ann Weiss and the great-nephew of Jacob Weiss, is an organ deliveryman. "I actually know a guy who did this, he delivered eyes," commented Winick. "So Lou does organ deliveries, he does eyes and kidneys and whatnot. I've exaggerated the true-to-life part, which is that I know

someone who delivers eyes. So [in the story], Lou's got this big idiot friend Richie, who he takes along to go pick up a pair of eyes. And Richie convinces him to look inside, because it feels really kind of heavy for a pair of eyes. They crack open the cooler and in there is a hand, instead of a pair of eyes. They were told to bring the hand to this address, and when they get there three Secret Service-looking guys try to kill them. And then we're off to the races, and everybody's trying to kill them and get the hand. It involves everything from a gaggle of drag queens—it's going to be the best fight between a dozen drag queens and a dozen Secret Service-type guys in black ever. [The story] is also about a porn king, a restaurant entrepreneur—it's fun, it's a silly over the top one, again trying to tackle another completely different genre."

In telling the story of three generations of a Jewish family, Judd Winick is doing something that no one—not even Will Eisner—had done before in American comic books. He covers the breadth and scope of the entire 20th-century Jewish experience. However, as important as *Yossel, Caper*, and their contemporaries are, they only represent one side of comics publishing: that of the serious drama or historical memoir. And yet, 80 percent of comic books are of the superhero genre, and, surprisingly, an increasing number of superheroes are turning out to be Jewish.

THE MARTIAN JEW

American Flagg #50 (First Comics, March 1988).

Reuben Flagg was a Jew who felt a distinct sense of alienation... because he was literally an alien.

What was in the 1970s a trickle of openly Jewish superhumans—like Chris Claremont's X-Men character Kitty Pryde, or Seraph, the Israeli member of the DC supergroup the Global Guardians—became a veritable flood in the '80s and '90s.

Among this new generation of explicitly Jewish characters was Reuben Flagg, the protagonist of the artist/writer Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg* (originally published by First Comics), who made his debut in 1983. Born in 1950, Howard Chaykin had been a comic-book artist since the 1970s, and his mentor was the fellow Jewish cartoonist Gil Kane. However, Chaykin soon felt that the comics industry was creatively stifling, and he briefly left comic books behind for a career in commercial illustration. But then alternative publishers like First and Pacific cropped up, lacking the formulaic qualities of Marvel and DC and giving Chaykin newfound hope for the industry. He made his triumphant return with *American Flagg,* a science fiction series taking place in the year 2031. A chain of cataclysmic worldwide events in 1996—thereafter known as "The Year of the Domino"—has caused the U.S. government and heads of major corporations to uproot themselves and relocate to the planet Mars.

The exiled American government and its corporate allies have formed the Plex, an overarching organization that governs the United Statesofrom its Martian capital. Cities are centered around malls and dubbed Plexmalls. The law is enforced by the Plex's earthside police force, the Plexus Rangers. Reuben Mikhail Flagg, literally a Jew from Mars, is drafted by the Plexus Rangers after being replaced by a hologram on his hit TV show *Mark Thrust, Sexus Ranger.* His partner is an android with a holographic head named Luther Ironhand, and one of his confidantes is Raul, a talking cat with robotic hands that give him human-level manual dexterity.

Chaykin's series contained wry social satire, as when in *American Flagg* #50 (1988), Reuben becomes president of the Plex and the St.

Louis Plexmall complains of a food shortage. "It's what you get when an actor takes over," grumbles one citizen in a not-so-veiled reference to Ronald Reagan. Flagg is filmed by a camera crew and his adventures are broadcast to the public, which at the time seemed like a spoof of the American public's thirst for spectacle. Nowadays it seems eerily prescient, since in the wake of *American Flagg,* reality shows like *COPS* and *Survivor* have borne out Chaykin's predictions of things to come. And early on, when Flagg loses his job on *Mark Thrust,* it is because he is deemed an "undesirable bohemian" with leftist political views. Chaykin's message in *American Flagg* is that any society can devolve into a Nazi-style fascist police state.

But androids, talking felines, and Swiftian social satire aside, *American Flagg*'s greatest innovation is perhaps the fact that it was the first comic book in the action/sci-fi/superhero genre to feature a Jewish protagonist. When Flagg becomes president, his sometime paramour Grace DeWolfe asks him, "Exactly how does it feel to be the first Jewish president?" Visibly shaken by being literally handed the keys to the castle, Flagg can only stammer nervously. Other references to Flagg's Judaism are made throughout the series. In issue #26, Grace locates Flagg after she puts a homing device in his mezuzah. In issue #2, Flagg is at a wedding when the bride's sister, Dagmar Liebowitz, says, "I thought you were just adorable as Mark Thrust. Can I ask you two questions?" Flagg shrugs, "Shoot." Dagmar asks, "Are you really Jewish like Fanfax says?" "Yes. Second question?" "Do you want to go to the ladies room with me?" Of course, they *do* go off together to canoodle. Reuben Flagg's status as a handsome James Bond-style leading man is important, because this non-stereotypical portrayal of a Jewish character—the polar opposite of the Woody Allen-style nebbish—was sorely lacking pop culture of the 1980s. Chaykin also chose to make a personal statement in giving his protagonist a Jewish identity. "I'm no longer afraid, ashamed, or uninterested enough in my personal background to keep it out of the work," he explained in an interview with Gary Groth for the book *The New Comics.* "I'm no longer a Jew masquerading as a gentile through comics."

AMERICAN FLAGG was probably only the second comic book title of any genre to feature a Jewish protagonist. The first was *American Splendor,* and it is significant that both had the word "American" in the title, as though referencing the stereotypical Jew's longing to be embraced as American. Of course, in the Golden Age of comics, there was also Captain America and Superman, who embodied "… the American Way." And both those quintessentially American superheroes were created by Jews.

Howard Chaykin's character Reuben Flagg: the Jew as super-cool adventurer.

And while Reuben Flagg was envisioned by his creator as Jewish from day one, many other longtime comic-book characters with no previously established ethnic background were retooled as Jewish during the past couple of decades. The Jewish identities of Magneto and Ben Grimm have already been discussed, but there are many more.

Consider the green-haired superhero Doc Samson, aka the psychiatrist Dr. Leonard Samson, a supporting character from *The Incredible Hulk*. In the writer Peter David's story "Revisionist History" in *Marvel Holiday Special* from January 1993, Doc Samson visits a Hebrew school to tell the kids the story of Hanukkah. But these are modern kids, and they find the story a bit too dry, so Doc Samson jazzes things up by weaving other Marvel characters like Wolverine and the Hulk—and even real pop culture figures like Elvis—into the story. Doc Samson being Jewish seems to work nicely, as the character's very name and powers are a nod to the biblical Samson; the gamma-irradiated shrink loses his superpowers if you cut his long emerald locks.

DC Comics, meanwhile, was also making its cast of characters more diverse. This was largely due to the efforts of Jenette Kahn, who became the company's publisher in 1976. But Kahn, a Harvard graduate and the daugher of a rabbi, was not the only new face at DC in the 1970s. Paul Levitz would also prove to be a major player in the company's evolution during that era. Levitz, born in 1956 in Brooklyn to Alfred and Hannah Levitz, went to junior high school with his fellow future comics scribe Paul Kupperberg. Like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Mort Weisinger, and Julius Schwartz, Paul Levitz and Paul Kupperberg got their start through fanzines; together, they edited the fanzine *Etcetera* in early 1971. After Levitz attracted attention with his subsequent editorship of *The Comic Reader,* the first comics fanzine to focus exclusively on news of the field, he started freelancing for DC in late 1972, apprenticing for the legendary comic-book artist/editor Joe Orlando (*MAD, House of Mystery*). "It was a fairly easy and gradual segue for me," Levitz said of his leap from fan to pro. "I was a New York area fan and DC was a hospitable place for me while I was doing my fanzine. Also, when [DC] moved to 75 Rockefeller Plaza in 1973, just after I went to work in the offices, about half of DC's office staff was Jewish, so it was a pretty smooth transition from the culture I was used to at home."

From 1976 to 1978, and then again from 1981 to 1989, Paul Levitz was the primary writer on *Legion of Super-Heroes*, about a team of crime-fighters in the 30th century. The Legion was created in 1958 by the writer Otto Binder and the artist Al Plastino under the editorial guid-

ance of Mort Weisinger. During the 1960s, Jerry Siegel wrote many of the *Legion of Super-Hero* stories, also for Weisinger. When Levitz began his career at DC, neither Siegel nor Weisinger were working there anymore, but he was lucky enough to have met them and was greatly influenced by their creative legacy. "I grew up on Mort's Superman titles, with writing by Jerry and other great comics writers," he revealed. "Getting to know all these early greats of comics was one of the privileges of my life. It's rare to make friends in your parents' and grandparents' generation, and I got to do so with people whose work shaped mine."

By the mid-1980s, Levitz had become an integral part of DC. Along with Jenette Kahn, the managing editor/artist Dick Giordano, the editor Karen Berger, and a select team of writers and artists, Levitz played a key role in DC's company-wide revamping of its entire line of characters. Under the supervision of Levitz, Kahn, and Giordano, the artist/writer John Byrne reworked Superman's origin story in the miniseries *Man of Steel;* Frank Miller and the artist David Mazzuchelli redefined Batman in the miniseries *Batman: Year One;* writer Greg Potter and the artist George Perez retooled *Wonder Woman* by giving her an all-new series; and the writer Marv Wolfman teamed with Perez to simplify DC's out-of-control continuity in the landmark 12-issue company-wide maxi-series *Crisis on Infinite Earths.* The DC characters' origins and backstories had become convoluted in the decades since the company's founding in 1935, and a housecleaning was needed. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was far from DC's only attempt to make sense of its then unwieldy library of characters. As a scorecard for fans both old and new, a 24-issue guidebook of nearly every DC character past and present was published from 1984 to 1986 as *Who's Who in the DC Universe;* among the *Who's Who* writers were Paul Levitz, Marv Wolfman, and the former *X-Men* scribe Len Wein. And with the contributions of Levitz, Kahn, Wolfman, Berger, and Wein, it's important to note that Jewish comics creators were instrumental in the changes being wrought in the mainstream comic book industry of the 1980s.

Levitz decided to fashion a Jewish genealogy for the company's 30th-century superhero Colossal Boy, who in *Legion of Super-heroes* grows to gigantic size in order to fend off evil. In a story that Levitz wrote for *DC Sepcial Series #21* (1979), he showed Colossal Boy celebrating Hnukkah. "In general, I tried to have the [*Legion of Super-Heroes*] characters represent a more diverse view of the universe," he explained. Knowing that Colossal Boy's real name was Gim Allon, a name that reminded him of the former Israeli cabinet minister Yigal Allon, Levitz

decided to expand Colossal Boy's backstory by making the gigantic hero a Jew—and in doing so, Colossal Boy's mother, Marthe Allon, the president of Earth, became Jewish as well. A Jewish president? *"That's how you know it's science fiction!"* laughed Paul Kupperberg.

Levitz also used the series to comment on the issue of interfaith relationships. In "Guess What's Coming to Dinner" (issue #308, February 1984), Gim Allon introduces his alien wife, Yera—an orange-skinned beauty from the planet Durla—to his parents. The young couple had secretly married a few issues earlier. After Gim and Yera leave, Marthe turns to her husband and quips, "Now, I wonder if I can find a way to convince them to bring their kids up Jewish?" This was Levitz's way of saying that interfaith relationships will still be an issue in the Jewish community a thousand years from now.

Levitz's old friend Paul Kupperberg also brought Jewish issues into the established DC Universe. As the writer of the 1980s title *The Daring New Adventures of Supergirl,* Kupperberg took the opportunity to introduce two Jewish characters into the Girl of Steel's supporting cast. Supergirl's secret identity was Linda Danvers, who in this series lived in Kupperberg's old stomping grounds of Chicago. In issue #1 (1982), we meet Ida Berkowitz, Danvers's landlady, a Jewish Holocaust survivor. "Supergirl's landlady was based actually on [a real woman named] Ida Berkowitz," Kupperberg revealed, "who was my landlady at that exact same address in Chicago, where I lived! And she was a lovely old woman and she used to let me slide on the rent because I was a poor little freelancer, so she never evicted me and for that I thank her!" Did the real Ida Berkowitz know that her tenant turned her into a comic-book character? "She was gone by the time I wrote the comic," Kupperberg replied. "She was old [when I knew her]. She had sold the building, and she used to call me 'Mistah Kuppaberg, dahlink!'"

Kupperberg feels that he has a certain responsibility to make the comic-book world as representative of the Jewish experience as the real world. "I will not deny [being Jewish]," he stated. "I won't be

The DC Comics writer/ editor Paul Levitz revealed that the superhero Colossal Boy (looming in the upper right corner) was Jewish in *The Legion of Super-heroes* story "Guess What's Coming to Dinner." Levitz is now DC's president and publisher.

quiet about it. And it's just something to be proud of. Look what we as a people have endured and gone through. So I admittedly don't have space for [Jewish characters] in a lot of [my] superhero comics, but I have used them occasionally." Another Paul Kupperberg-created Jewish DC character was Ida Berkowitz's daughter Rachael, aka the supervillain Blackstarr, who first appeared in *The Daring New Adventures of Supergirl* #13 (November 1983). Born in 1930s Warsaw to Ida and her simple tailor husband, Chaim, Rachael saw her father murdered by Nazis and spent her formative years in a concentration camp. This unhinged her mind, and she eventually came to believe in the Nazis' "Final Solution." In her late teens, Rachael came to America, earned her Ph.D. at 18, and unlocked the secrets of the unified field theory, tapping into Earth's natural energy and becoming an elemental being known as Blackstarr. Leading a racist group called the Party for Social Reform designed to stir up anti-Semitic resentment in the community, Blackstarr starts a riot that can only be stopped by Supergirl. "When I was living in Chicago," Kupperberg said, "it was at the time of the Nazi marches in Skokie, Illinois. And I played off of that for that *Supergirl* story, [which was called] 'Echoes of Time Gone.'"

A couple of years later, in *DC Comics Presents* #86 (which was a "Crisis Crossover," tying into events in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*) in the Kupperberg-scripted story "Into the Valley of the Shadow … !" Blackstarr finds herself forming an uneasy alliance with Superman and Supergirl to save the universe from destruction. Like Magneto, there is some good in Blackstarr, but the horrors of the Holocaust have damaged her to such an extent that it takes extreme circumstances to bring out.

Not only is Colossal Boy far from the only Jewish giant in comics; he's far from the only Jewish giant at DC Comics! There's also the superhero formerly known as Nuklon, aka Albert Rothstein, who more recently changed his *nom de combat* to Atom Smasher. In either guise, Al Rothstein is incredibly tall and can grow to gigantic heights. Back when he was Nuklon—and a member of the Justice League of America—Al's Jewish identity was a big part of the story "Where the Wild Things Are,"
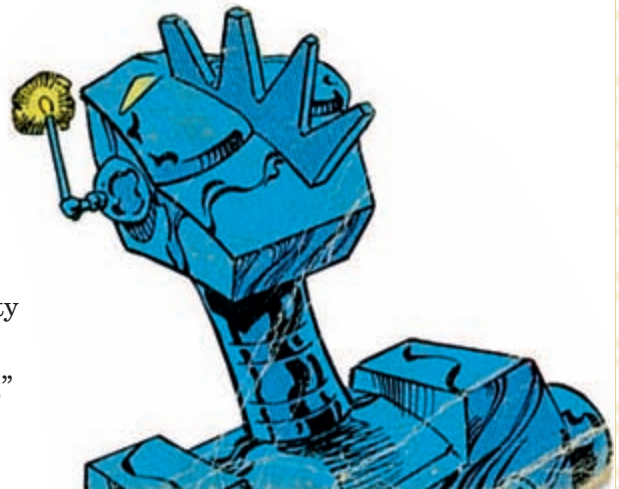
scripted by Gerard Jones (*Justice League of America* #95, January 1995). In this tale, Al is on a date with the gorgeous Brazilian superhero Fire, aka Beatriz DaCosta, who can generate green flame. As the date winds down, Fire tells Al that she asked him out because she wants someone to settle down with. Al is flattered, but he tells her that their relationship couldn't evolve into something serious because "I'm going to marry a Jewish girl … I owe something to my family … to my heritage … I'm like a link in a chain. I can't be the one to break that chain." (It's also interesting to note that the author of that *JLA* story, Gerard Jones, would later author the book *Men of Tomorrow,* about early Jewish comics creators like Siegel and Shuster.)

More recently, in the pages of February 2006's *Justice League Unlimited* #16—a comic book based on the animated Cartoon Network TV series of the same name—Supergirl flies up to kiss Atom Smasher under the mistletoe, wishing him a Merry Christmas. He shyly responds, "Uh, Supergirl … not that I want you to take back that kiss or anything … But y'know … I'm Jewish." Later, Al's friend Firestorm pulls his pal aside and asks why he's in such gloomy spirits. "I guess since my uncle passed away, this time of year has been tough for me," Al responds. "I mean, with Hanukkah and all … we used to spend it with him every year … sort of a family thing …" For a while, Al seems inconsolable, but helping an equally lonely supervillain connect with his wife and son eventually makes Al happy. In the story, titled "Smashing Through the Snow" and scripted by Adam Beechen, we see that Al wears his Jewish identity on his sleeve; it's neither to be hidden nor to be used as a plot device. It's simply part of who he is.
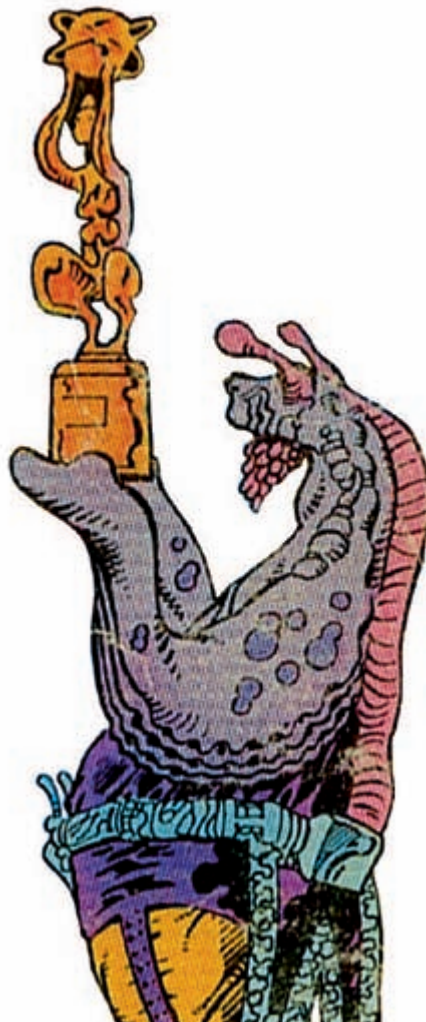
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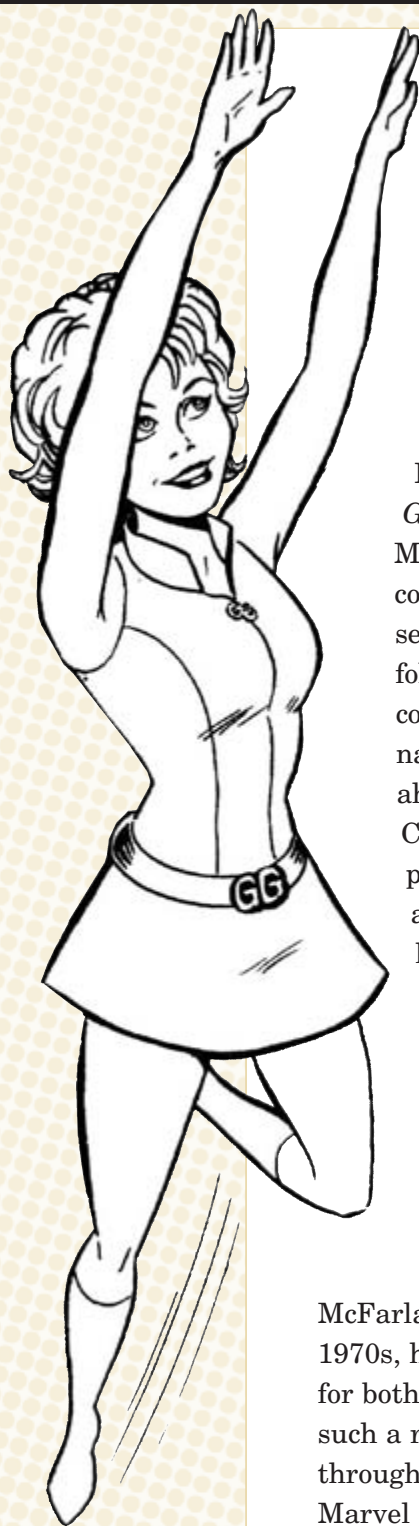
As hard as Marvel and DC have worked to integrate Jewish characters into their respective comics, they don't hold a monopoly on Jewish superheroes. Independent (aka "indie") comics companies have also developed Semitic crimefighters. In December 1991, seven popular Marvel artists—Todd McFarlane (*Spider-Man*), Rob Liefeld (*New Mutants*), Jim Lee (*X-Men*), Marc Silvestri (*Wolverine*), Erik Larsen (*Amazing Spider-Man*), Jim Valentino (*Guardians of the Galaxy*), and Whilce Portacio (*Uncanny X-Men*)—met with Marvel's president Terry Stewart and demanded more creative control of their work. When Marvel balked at their demands, the seven comics creators jumped ship, creating Image Comics the following year. Image quickly became the third highest-selling comic-book publisher in the marketplace, and nowadays it alternates between third and fourth place (usually either directly ahead of or behind the fellow indie publisher Dark Horse Comics). In "The Spawning Ground," the back-of-the-issue text page in *Spawn* #1 (May 1992), McFarlane talks about why he and his partners founded Image. And in explaining his motive, he pays homage to one of his heroes, Jack Kirby: "By the time I started collecting at age 17, his legend had grown to almost mythical proportions. Here was a man who had created, co-created, or at least had a hand in the conception of nearly every character I had ever heard of. In almost any occupation, a person of his esteem would command respect from both the people he worked for and from those who follow his work. Unfortunately, as far as I could tell, this wasn't true."

McFarlane then goes on to tell how as an adolescent in the mid-1970s, he had heard about the struggles Kirby had endured working for both Marvel and DC. If someone as important as Jack Kirby got such a raw deal, McFarlane thought, what chance did *he* have? Later, throughout the '80s, Kirby was engaged in a prolonged battle with Marvel over the return of his original artwork. The battle ended in 1987, when Marvel returned some of it, but it was nowhere near the thousands of pages he had drawn for his erstwhile employer. The battle further enraged many of his industry colleagues, who argued that the King deserved better treatment.

The problem, as McFarlane saw it, was that to most comic-book companies the characters were more important than their creators. With this in mind, McFarlane kept a close watch on the changes going on within the industry and was surprised to see companies like Pacific and Eclipse spring up throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. These were companies that valued the creators over their creations by offering creators ownership of their own characters as well as royalties. McFarlane further acknowledged that artists like Kirby helped make the indie companies like Pacific what they were with titles like *Captain Victory* and *Silver Star*. Rob Liefeld even included a character in his Image title *Youngblood* named Kirby who resembles the King, including his trademark cigar hanging out of his mouth. And Erik Larsen's Image title *The Savage Dragon* features a title character who looks very much like one of Lee's and Kirby's Inhumans from their *Fantastic Four* run during the '60s.

It was because of McFarlane and his Image partners' respect and admiration for Kirby that in 1994 Image published the Kirby-created title *Phantom Force*, penciled, plotted, and co-written by Kirby. Along with the Kirby-created "Kirbyverse" titles such as *Jack Kirby's Secret City Saga* published by the Topps trading card company in 1993, *Phantom Force* was one of the final projects Kirby would work on before his death in 1994. Although Kirby and Stan Lee never fully reconciled their friendship, as one final gesture of their partnership Lee was instrumental in setting up a pension for Kirby's widow during the final years of her life.

However, even though Image was founded on the principles of creator-owned comics that even a Jack Kirby could be proud of, there was initially some question among critics as to the quality of the product being churned out. At first, Image was famous for testosterone-drenched, adolescent-pandering comics like McFarlane's *Spawn* or Rob Liefeld's *Youngblood*. However, by the late 1990s, the company's output diversified somewhat. This had much to do with the ascendancy of Jim Valentino, the creator of *Shadowhawk,* to publisher of Image in 1999.

GoGirl! © Trina Robbins. Art by Anne Timmons.

GoGirl, created by the pioneering underground cartoonist Tina Robbins, is one of the few female Jewish superheroes to have her own title. Art by Anne Timmons.

For years, Valentino had used his position as an Image partner to publish titles by creators outside the original seven-member circle, creators whose work stood out as an alternative to standard superhero fare, like Jeff Smith's *Bone* or Colleen Doran's *A Distant Soil.* His predecessor, the former Image publisher Larry Marder, had also pushed for a more eclectic catalogue of titles.

And this allowed the inclusion of the Jewish writer/cartoonist Trina Robbins' *GoGirl!* in 2000, illustrated by the artist Anne Timmons. Robbins first met Timmons at a San Diego comic-book convention. The two became email pen pals, and one day Timmons proposed that they do a comic book together. Robbins concocted a series about Lindsay Goldman, a cute blonde teenager who inherits the superpowers of her mother, Janet. Janet was herself a 1970s superhero called Go-Go Girl until her husband felt threatened by having a superhero wife, at which time she hung up her white boots and minidress. Now Janet has passed on the costume to Lindsay, who fights crime as GoGirl! The series, in which Lindsay also tries to adjust to life as a high school student, has been favorably compared to vintage *Archie Comics* and the Mary Marvel stories in Fawcett's Golden Age-era *Captain Marvel* comics. In other words, it's decidedly retro for a modern superhero book, simply because of how free of sex and violence it is. At first, Trina Robbins was skeptical that Image would publish such a girl-friendly comic book. After all, this was the publisher behind *Spawn,* and even the wittier Image titles like Larsen's *Savage Dragon* and Sam Keith's *The Maxx* were indelibly male. What chance did she have of getting published in such a boys' club?

But Robbins underestimated Image's publisher, Larry Marder, also known as the creator of the indie comic book *Tales of the Beanworld.* He understood that there was a place at Image for something less mascu-

line like *GoGirl!* "Larry, what a sweet guy," Robbins said.
"He wanted to do something different, and he liked it. And then
when he left, [Marder's successor] Jim Valentino was also really nice!"
Nevertheless, in 2001, after *GoGirl!* #5 came out, Image stopped pub-
lishing the series, which fell victim to an increasingly cluttered and
competitive market, even though it had been critically acclaimed. But
fate stepped in the following year in the form of Dark Horse Comics,
which picked up *GoGirl!,* reprinting the first five issues in graphic novel
form and subsequently publishing all-new *GoGirl!* graphic novels.

As her surname suggests, Lindsay Goldman is Jewish.
But *GoGirl!* was hardly the first time Robbins dealt
with openly Jewish subject matter in her comics. In
1985, in an issue of the anthology series *Wimmen's
Comics,* she teamed up with her fellow Jewish
underground cartoonist Sharon Kahn Rudahl to create
"Zog Nit Keyn Mol," a short story in comics form
adapted from "The Partisan's Song," by Hirsh Glik
(1922–44), who was known as the poet of the Warsaw
Ghetto. Robbins said she was drawn to the poem
because "it's absolutely beautiful. And it became the
partisans' [rallying cry]. There were Jewish partisans,
there was a Jewish underground. It became their song.
And it's just a gorgeous song. And what I did was I
found a translation, and we did it together. I took the
translation, and adapted it as a comic, and she
penciled it and I inked it." Throughout this comic strip,
we see portions of the song such as "Wherever falls a droplet of our
blood, there our courage and our strength will surely sprout." As we
read this, we see images of a young woman in a Jewish neighborhood
tending to her aged grandmother. Eventually, the young woman has
to leave to attend a political rally, and as her *bubbe* waves goodbye to
her, we see the tattoo on her arm and realize that she's a Holocaust
survivor. It's an extremely moving and understated piece that reads
like a short film.

Photograph by Ann Sanfedele.

Trina Robbins

But there's more than one side to any artist, and with *GoGirl!*
Robbins showed her lighter side. And it's important that GoGirl, aka
Lindsay Goldman, is openly and proudly a member of the Tribe.
Robbins is fairly matter-of-fact about this aspect of her creation.
"Why shouldn't she be Jewish?" asks Robbins. "She just happens to
be Jewish. Because I was born Jewish, and as long as there's
somebody who would like to shove me in an oven because I was born
Jewish, I'll always be Jewish. I was a real *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

"Zog Nit Keyn Mol," a comics adaptation of one of the poems of Hersh Glik, poet of the Warsaw Ghetto. Written and inked by Trina Robbins, penciled by Sharon Rudahl.

fan. And on that show, [the character of] Willow Rosenberg is Jewish! In one episode it's Christmas, and she says, 'Well, we don't celebrate Christmas, we celebrate Hanukkah!' And that's the only reason you know she's Jewish! Well that's great! She just happens to be Jewish! Why make a big deal out of it? When somebody can be black and somebody can be Jewish and somebody can be Asian and you don't make a big deal out of it. When you don't make a big deal out of what someone is, that's real equality."

The Jewish female superhero Go-Girl, aka Lindsay Goldman, created and written by Trina Robbins, art by Anne Timmons.

VERTIGO VISIONS

Thanks to works like *American Splendor* and *Maus,* as well as writers like Paul Levitz and Howard Chaykin, explicit Jewish references in comic books are now the norm. But not all the Jewish writers in comics have come from America. Neil Gaiman was born to Jewish parents in Portchester, England, on November 10, 1960. In 1988, Gaiman, a former journalist, set about revamping the DC character the Sandman for the editor Karen Berger. However, unlike most revampings, in which a backstory is tweaked (e.g., John Byrne's Superman), or a new person is selected to assume the mantle of a predecessor (e.g., Gil Kane's and John Broome's Green Lantern), the only thing *this* Sandman had in common with the prior versions of the character was his name. The 1940s-era Sandman was a superhero with a gas mask who sprinkled sand on his opponents after clobbering them. The 1970s-era Sandman was a Jack Kirby character that operated from a semi-psychedelic dream dimension.

By contrast, Neil Gaiman's Sandman, far from being a superhero, was the Lord of Dreams, the personification of dreams. Most of the characters in *Sandman* don't actually refer to the lead character as "Sandman"; instead, he answers to a variety of names such as Morpheus, Dream Lord, Kai'ckul, Nightmare King, or simply Dream. Dream occupies "The Land of Nod, in the East of Eden," as it's written in the Bible. This is a realm that Gaiman dubbed "The Dreaming," where Dream rules as a monarch, surrounded by subjects. This *Sandman* series would borrow certain concepts from both the Torah and the Kabbalah and would become one of DC's most critically acclaimed efforts ever, thanks in part to the unusual amount of creative control afforded Gaiman by Berger.

Beginning early in the series' run, Gaiman sometimes worked Jewish themes into *Sandman.* In *Sandman* #8, entitled "The Sound of Her Wings," the first to feature Morpheus's happy-go-lucky sister Death, a depressed Dream follows the chipper Death around as the latter goes about her daily chore of collecting departed souls. Some may wonder why Gaiman chose to depict Death as someone you can't wait to meet, and a female someone at that. But this follows the Kabbalistic notion that death is female. And as Gaiman wrote in the collection *The Death Gallery,* "There's a tale in the Caballa that suggests that the Angel of

Courtesy of Neil Gaiman.

Neil Gaiman, one of the most famous and influential mainstream comic-book writers of all time. Gaiman occasionally weaves Jewish characters and themes into works such as *Sandman* and *1602*.

Death is so beautiful that on finally seeing it (or him, or her) you fall in love so hard, so fast, that your soul is pulled out through your eyes. I like that story." At one point in "The Sound of Her Wings," the macabre siblings visit an old Jewish man with a yarmulke who's dying. The man, Harry, begs Death not to let him die without first saying the Shema. At the conclusion of the prayer he dies, at which point he says, "It's good that I said the sh'ma. My old man always said it guaranteed you a place in heaven. If you believe in heaven … So. I'm dead. Now what?" To which Death replies, "Now's when you find out, Harry." Gaiman has singled out this story as the issue of *Sandman* where everything really started to gel creatively.

Later, in the 1991 story "Three Septembers and a January" (*Sandman* #29), a tale about perseverance, Death comes to claim Joshua Abraham Norton, the self-proclaimed "Emperor of the United States of America," and a legendary 19th-century Jewish San Franciscan. Most people think Joshua's a loon, but he seems content and becomes a local celebrity, going so far as to print his own money. Dream's and Death's androgynous sister/brother Desire sends an emissary, the "King of Pain," to try to talk Joshua into making a deal with the promise of money, power, and sex as his reward. But Joshua cannot be corrupted and prefers to remain poor, obscure, and pure of heart. At the end of the story, Joshua collapses and dies in the middle of the street one miserably rainy evening in 1880. Death comes to claim Joshua, whereby she tells him, "You were Jewish once, weren't you, Joshua? Did you ever hear the story of the 36 Tzaddikim?" He answers no, and she continues: "They say that the world rests on the backs of 36 living saints—36 unselfish men and women. Because of them, the world continues to exist. They are the secret kings of this world." Joshua confesses that he doesn't see the significance, and Death says that she's met a lot of kings, emperors, and heads of state, and she likes him best. In the end, Joshua is vindicated; he has lived by a firm set of ethics from which he never wavered, and while it didn't give him fame or fortune, it guaranteed him the knowledge that he was a good man living a moral life.

Sandman ended in 1996 with the story "The Tempest," the sequel to the earlier story "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Both stories are about Dream coaxing plays out of William Shakespeare as part of a bargain, and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was the first (and thus far, only) comic-book story to have won the coveted World Fantasy

A far cry from the typical Grim Reaper we so often see, Neil Gaiman's "Death," from his book *Vertigo Visions,* borrows liberally from Kabbalistic notions of death. For one thing, Gaiman's "Death" is female. Art by Clive Barker.

Award, in 1991. In fact, some of the more elitist science fiction and fantasy authors on the board of the WFAs were so disgusted that a comic book had won the prestigious award that the very next morning they changed the bylaws to forbid a comic book from ever being nominated again. This has not stopped such notables as the author Norman Mailer, the writer/filmmaker Clive Barker, and the musician Tori Amos from singing Sandman's praises. Gaiman occasionally brings the character back for a graphic novel, as he did most recently in 2003 with the publication of *The Sandman: Endless Nights.*

Sandman is also credited as being one of the catalysts for Karen Berger's formation of a new DC imprint called Vertigo in 1992. Many of the titles that Berger was editing—like *Sandman*—were at that point released under the Vertigo logo, as were other previously existing DC titles like *Swamp Thing,* and new titles like the *Sandman* spin-off miniseries *Death: The High Cost of Living* (also written by Gaiman), about Dream's sister. Vertigo specializes in more mature, adult-oriented titles, mostly of the fantasy and horror genres, that don't meet with the approval of the youth-oriented Comics Code Authority established in the 1950s. Through Vertigo titles like *Sandman,* with its strong female characters, DC has managed to garner the respect of more female readers, a coveted demographic. These days, Vertigo's visions continue to challenge comics readers, thanks to the efforts of Gaiman and Berger.

European cartoonists are also exploring Jewish subject matter. The French cartoonist Joann Sfar routinely depicts rabbis and golems in books like *Vampire Loves* and *The Rabbi's Cat.*

IN 2003, Neil Gaiman wrote the Marvel miniseries *1602,* which asks the question: What would the Marvel Comics characters have been like had they lived in the year 1602? The series also explores Magneto's Jewish identity, because if he had been alive then, he would have been at the mercy of the Spanish Inquisition. In the story, the ever-cunning Magneto tries to hide in plain sight by becoming the feared Grand Inquisitor, until his Jewish lineage is discovered and he has to come to terms with who he really is.

UP, UP, AND AWAY...BUT WHERE TO?

By the 1980s, Jerry Siegel's and Joe Shuster's contribution to comics history gave way to stories like this one. In an alternate future, humanity never latches onto the concept of heroes, and so lacks inspiration and guidance—that is, until two kids, patterned after Siegel and Shuster, reintroduce the heroic ideal by telling stories about a new character: Superman!

How very far we've come. The emergence of Jewish characters in comic books has mirrored American Jewry's own struggle for acceptance in a non-Jewish world. In the Golden Age, an era of prejudice and quotas, writers and cartoonists intent on creating simple children's entertainment hid subtle Jewish metaphors behind assimilated archetypes. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster most likely developed Superman completely unaware that they were following in the venerable tradition of Jewish myths such as the Golem. But that doesn't make the Jewish subtext in their work any less valid. The same holds true for Joe Simon's and Jack Kirby's Nazi-bashing Captain America. So many others—among them Will Eisner, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Jerry Robinson, Stan Lee, and Joe Kubert— got their start during this era. And although on a surface level we can admire the work ethic of that first wave of Jewish comic-book creators, it's also worth noting that the only thing golden about the Golden Age was the luster projected by the 24-karat superheroes who shone like stars during that era.

In the Silver Age, Jewish comics creators like Bill Gaines, Harvey Kurtzman, and Al Feldstein crafted yarns both horrific (*Tales from the Crypt*) and humorous (*MAD*), elevating the medium and openly discussing anti-Semitism and racism. Meanwhile, John Broome, Gil Kane, and Julius Schwartz revitalized the very concept of the superhero, a concept left for dead by Dr. Frederick Wertham. A decade later, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby courted a high school and college-level crowd with tales of metaphoric mutant "outsiders." Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, underground comix creators like Trina Robbins, Art Spiegelman, Diane Noomin, Aline Kominsky, and Harvey Pekar told deeply personal stories about their Jewish

upbringing. And in the late 1970s, comics creators like Chris Claremont and Joe Kubert created the first openly Jewish super-heroes, and subtext gave way to text.

Now, in the Bronze Age, Jewish comics creators have transformed an industry once marketed to young boys into a well-respected art form that graces the walls of prestigious museums such as the Whitney. Thanks to creators like Spiegelman and Eisner, Jewish-themed graphic novels are more common than ever before. And their status as educational resources in schools and libraries ensures that the comics industry will someday gain the respect and artistic legitimacy it has long desired. We can only guess what the future has in store for Jewish comic-book creators. But the proverbial writing is on the wall. In this day and age when multicultural comic books aimed at an adult readership are becoming more and more the norm, Jewish comics professionals who create openly Jewish content are also moving more to the fore. Miriam Katin, Ben Katchor, Judd Winick, Howard Chaykin, and James Sturm are proof that the circle is only growing.

JEWS AREN'T THE ONLY minority making their voices heard in comics: black comics creators like Aaron MacGruder, Kyle Baker, Keith Knight, Barbara Brandon, Ho Che Anderson, and Dwayne McDuffie are seeing their stories told; so are gay and lesbian cartoonists like Howard Cruse, Roberta Gregory, Eric Shanower, and Ariel Shrag; Asian comics pros like Jim Lee, Frank Cho, Adrian Tomine, Stan Sakai, and Lela Lee are going strong; and Latino comic book creators like the Hernandez Brothers (Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario), Rafael Navarro, Yvonne Mojica, Rhode Montijo, and Spain Rodriguez are making their voices heard.

Older creators like Jack Kirby are no longer with us, but Kirby's legacy remains in the influence he has had on mainstream movie franchises like George Lucas's *Star Wars* sextet. The Guillermo Del Toro's film adaptation of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* comic in 2003 looked more like a Jack Kirby comic than almost anything seen previously in cinema; with its slimy BEMs and bombastic fight scenes, it nearly out-Kirbyed Kirby. And during the spring of 2007, the first season finale of the hit NBC superhero drama *Heroes* featured a climactic fight scene that took place at the aptly named "Kirby Plaza." (Earlier that season one scene even featured a cameo by Stan Lee!) The very fact that hit movies like the *X-Men* trilogy (2000, 2003, 2006) are based on the classic Marvel stories crafted by Lee, Kirby, Wein, and Claremont is a testament to their staying power. And it's worth noting

FROM THE MIND OF "THE KING" COMES

JACK KIRBY'S GALACTIC BOUNTY HUNTERS

ICON #1

Jack "the King" Kirby may be deceased, but his daughter, Lisa, has teamed up with some of his admirers and colleagues to bring his unfinished projects to life. Long live the King!

that in all three *X-Men* movies, Magneto is portrayed as a Holocaust survivor, true to Claremont's depiction of the character. (Lee and Claremont even appear in cameo roles as befuddled suburbanites at the beginning of the third film, *X-Men: The Last Stand.*) Stan Lee is listed as the executive producer on nearly every Marvel production from 2000's *X-Men* to 2004's *Spider-Man* 2 to 2007's *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer.*

When one thinks about how these films have eclipsed Spielberg's and Lucas's popcorn movies of yore (*E.T.,* the *Indiana Jones* series) to become the juggernaut blockbusters of today, it truly seems like comic-book characters have become the most commercially viable property in showbiz. And with Jewish directors like Bryan Singer and Brett Ratner handling the *X-Men* franchise, one shouldn't be surprised that the Jewish subtext inherent in the idea of "mutantkind" has been preserved in the characters' journey to the silver screen.

Anyone could have predicted that the comic-book fanatics of yesteryear would have grown up to be the superstar film directors of today. After all, by its very nature, a comic book is cinematic; it even resembles a storyboard for a film or TV show. More surprising is the literati's embracing of comic books. Forget for a moment the fact that Neil Gaiman won a World Fantasy Award and that Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize; actual novelists, critics, and essayists are paying tribute to the comic books of their youth. In 2003, the *New York Times* critic Elvis Mitchell wrote a moving tribute to Jack Kirby on the eve of what would have been The King's 86th birthday. That the "newspaper of record" would devote valuable space to an analysis of a comic-book artist was unthinkable during Kirby's own lifetime. But that's just the tip of the Kryptonite iceberg.

Witness the Jewish novelist Michael Chabon, perhaps best known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning tome *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay,* about two Golden Age comic-book creators who are thinly veiled surrogates for Kirby, Simon, and their contemporaries. Along with similar works like Jonathan Lethem's novel *Fortress of Solitude*

and some of the pieces in the essay collection *Give My Regards to the Atom-Smashers* (edited by Sean Howe), *Kavalier and Clay* is part of a literary sub-genre. All the cited works use comic book superheroes as a metaphor for the Jewish experience. And that's the point; as more and more generations of writers grow up reading comic books, the dense layers of meaning encoded in those comics become hardwired into their psyches. Eventually, they have to write about comics, because comics are part of what made them become writers … and sometimes what made them aware of themselves as Jews. As the author Tom Piazza writes in "Kltpzyxm," his tongue-in-cheek contribution to *Atom-Smashers,* "What was his name? Siegel? Perfect. A Jew invents the biggest, strongest Dumb Goy in history. *Ubermensch,* in German. The ultimate assimilation, right? But then the goy needs enemies, otherwise so what? Everything has to generate its opposite. That's the whole problem with the three-dimensional world."

While Piazza sees Superman as Super-Goy, Chabon sees him as Super-Jew. And he makes a pretty good case for it in *Kavalier and Clay:* "They're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself." Indeed, it's fascinating that Chabon is not only the author of *Kavalier and Clay,* but also the creator of the Dark Horse comic book *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist,* about the fictional superhero described in his celebrated novel. The first issue of the comic book, published in 2004, opens with a 20-page story showing the origin of the title character, written by Chabon (who is also listed in the comic

book's masthead as "House Manager"). In the story, we see the Escapist's Captain America-esque origin, and all the Jewish metaphors contained therein: the themes of escaping from bondage; the ultra-WASPy hero created by a Jew; the hero who wears a mask to hide his true self.

Those themes could also apply to the works of Siegel, Shuster, Kane, Finger, and any other Golden Age Jewish comics creator. At one point, when the Escapist is describing the Iron Chain, an evil and ancient secret society that has evolved over time into the Nazi Party, we see a chain breaking apart, its severed links forming a Swastika. Chabon draws out the Jewish subtext that lay so dormant in the work of his Golden Age predecessors, to whom he pays homage. Again, subtext becomes text.

But now we come full circle. Finally, the unrecognized workhorses of yesteryear are paid tribute. Their work was not in vain. Jews who pioneered this art form, often for little material reward, are super-heroes in their own right, for they have created enduring icons of popular culture known around the globe—and, perhaps, beyond.
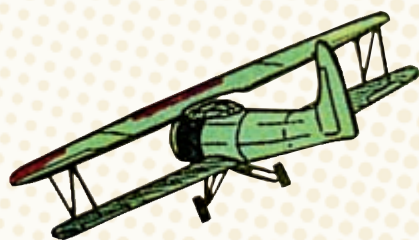
1933 *Funnies on Parade*, the first modern-format (7.5 x 10") comic book, is published by Max Gaines (born Max Ginzberg) and Harry L. Wildenberg of Eastern Color Printing.

1936 The short-lived *Wow, What a Magazine*! appears on newsstands, giving Will Eisner and Bob Kane their first work in comic books. The editor of this title is Eisner's future business partner, Jerry Iger.

1938 Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, debuts in *Action Comics* #1, published by National Comics (later to change its name to DC Comics).

1939 Batman, aka the Dark Knight, created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, debuts in *Detective Comics* #27.

1940 *The Spirit* debuts in newspapers across the country, syndicated by Register Tribune Syndicate. The strip is created, written, and illustrated by Will Eisner.

1941 Captain America, created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, first appears in *Captain America Comics* #1, published by the Jewish entrepreneur Martin Goodman. Captain America dresses in the colors of the American flag and fights the Nazi menace.

1952 *The Spirit* ceases publication.

1952 *MAD*, created by the Jewish cartoonist Harvey Kurtzman, debuts as a comic book published by Max Gaines's son, William M. Gaines, under his company EC Publications.

1954 *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book by the Jewish psychiatrist Dr. Frederick Wertham linking the reading of comic books with juvenile delinquency, is published. Over the next year, due to the ensuing furor over violence in comic books, William Gaines is forced to cancel many of his horror and sci-fi titles, such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Weird Science*.

1955 Partially in response to the increased comics censorship caused by *Seduction of the Innocent*, William Gaines turns *MAD* into a magazine. Kurtzman leaves the title shortly thereafter.

1956 In DC's *Showcase* #4, the Flash, aka police scientist Barry Allen, debuts, replacing the Flash of the Golden Age, Jay Garrick. This is the second character to wear the mantle of the Flash. Barry Allen was created by the Jewish writer Robert Kanigher and the artist Carmine Infantino and was supervised by the Jewish editor Julius Schwartz. Most of the Barry Allen Flash's subsequent adventures for the next decade were written by the Jewish writer John Broome. This "new Flash" inaugurates the Silver Age of comic books, comics' second great era.

1961 The Fantastic Four, created by Jack Kirby (art) and Stan Lee (story), make their dramatic debut in *Fantastic Four* #1, heralding what will later be known as the Marvel Age of Comics, a subset of the Silver Age that lasts roughly until 1969 and encompasses Marvel's busiest period of creative growth. (Stan Lee is a distant relative of Martin Goodman.)

1962 The writer Stan Lee and the artist Steve Ditko create Spider-Man, who makes his first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy* #15. Spider-Man soon becomes Marvel's flagship character.

1963 Martin Goodman's publishing company, which has gone through various names including Timely Comics and Atlas Comics, officially becomes known as Marvel Comics.

1972 *Funny Aminals* #1 (misspelling intentional) is published by the underground comix publisher Apex Novelties. In this comic book, an experimental, three-page version of the Holocaust memoir *Maus*, written and illustrated by Art Spiegelman, first appears.

1976 The Jewish writer Chris Claremont takes over Marvel Comics's *X-Men*. He will continue as the series' primary writer until 1991.

1978 Claremont reveals, in *Uncanny X-Men* #113, that X-Men arch foe Magneto is in fact a Jewish Holocaust survivor, and this is used to explain his distrust of humanity.

1978 *A Contract with God*, written and illustrated by Will Eisner, is published and is considered by many to be the first modern graphic novel. The creation of the graphic novel officially puts the lid on the Silver Age of Comics and beckons the Bronze Age of Comics, which is still underway.

1980 *RAW* magazin*e*, edited by Art Spiegelman, is first published, and its initial issues contain the first six chapters of *Maus*. *RAW* also prints the work of younger Jewish cartoonists, such as Drew Friedman and Ben Katchor, both of whom would become well-known figures in the comics world.

1986 *Maus*, Part One, is published as a graphic novel by Pantheon Books.

1988 *Sandman,* a new series about the mythical Lord of Dreams written by the Jewish comics writer Neil Gaiman, is first published. The series will occasionally embrace themes related to Judaism and/or Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism).

1991 The *Sandman* story, "Midsummer Night's Dream," written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Charles Vess, is the first comic-book story to win the prestigious World Fantasy Award.

1991 Part Two of *Maus*, subtitled "And Here My Troubles Began," is published by Pantheon.

1992 *Maus* is the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize.

1998 DC Comics publishes a three-part story arc in the Superman title

Man of Steel, by the Jewish writer/cartoonist Jon Bogdanove and his writing partner Louise Simonson, in which Superman aids in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and tries to prevent the Holocaust.

2000 Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a story about two Golden Age comic-book creators, is published by Random House. The characters of Joe Kavalier and Sammy Clay are inspired by such real-life comics personalities as Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Will Eisner, Jerry Robinson, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Stan Lee. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* will go on to win the Pulitzer Prize.

2002 In a *Fantastic Four* story written by the veteran comics pro Karl Kesel, the rock-like orange monster (and possible Golem metaphor) The Thing, aka Benjamin Jacob Grimm, reveals that he is Jewish.

2003 iBooks publishes the writer/illustrator Joe Kubert's graphic novel *Yossel*: *April 19, 1943,* a fictional portrayal of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

2003-4 DC publishes the writer Judd Winick's 12-part series *Caper,* the multi-generational chronicle of an American Jewish family.

2004 The movie *Spider-Man 2*, co-written by the *Kavalier and Clay* novelist Michael Chabon, opens to tremendous critical and box office success.

2005 *The Fantastic Four* movie is released, and in it Stan Lee has his first speaking role (rather than a nonspeaking cameo) in a Marvel movie; it's a bit part as the mailman Willie Lumpkin, a character created by Lee and Kirby for the *Fantastic Four* comic book in the 1960s.

2006 Jack Kirby's *Galactic Bounty Hunters* is published as a creator-owned title by Marvel's Icon line. The title is based on character sketches and unfinished pages that Kirby had originally planned to use in 1982's *Captain Victory* #7. *Galactic Bounty Hunters* is written by Kirby's daughter, Lisa, along with Michael Thibodeaux (Kirby's former inker), Steve Robertson, and Richard French.

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FROM KRAKOW TO KRYPTON:
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Arie Kaplan is a comedian, *MAD Magazine* writer, and author of the new comic book miniseries *Speed Racer: Chronicles of the Racer*. His other comic book credits include the DC title *Cartoon Network Action Pack* and the Papercutz series *Tales from the Crypt*. Arie lectures all over the country about comic books, comedians, and popular culture. He is the author of *Masters of the Comic Book Universe Revealed!* and he's also written for MTV, Cartoon Network, and PBS Kids.

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